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ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER AT THE NEW YORK, N. Y., POST OFFICE.

August 15, 1894.

No. 825.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, NE YORK.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

Vol. LXIV.



FRESH, The Race-Track Sport; OR, Kentucky Sharpers Brought to Bay.

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"JOE PHENIX" SERIES, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A SOLITARY HORSEMAN.

THE shades of night were beginning to gather as a horseman rode along a lonely road in Kentucky, coming from the mountain wilderness down into the famous "blue grass" region.

This rider was a muscular, well-built man,

"DON'T ATTEMPT TO DRAW YOUR WEAPON, OR YOU ARE A DEAD MAN!"
THE SPORT CRIED.

with a resolute face, whose firm-set jaw betokened great courage.

He was a good-looking fellow, with his clear cut features, keen gray-blue eyes, and yellow hair curling in crispy ringlets all over his head.

His steed was not a particularly prepossessing beast, being a gaunt-looking mare, thin in flesh and rough in coat. But the horse was no "scrub," for certain marks, to the eyes of an experienced horseman, indicated a good stock, and, like a singed cat, the animal might be a good deal better than she looked.

The horseman having allowed the mare to choose her own gait, the beast had changed from a slow canter into a walk.

"What is the matter with you, old girl?" the rider demanded as the horse began the slow pace; "you act as if you were tired out. But, you ought not to be, for you haven't come a great distance to-day, and yesterday you had a full day's rest."

The animal pricked up her ears as though she understood what was said.

Then she drooped her head and indicated as plainly as a dumb beast could indicate that she did not feel at all well.

"I am sorry for you, old girl, and I do not understand it, for you are always as game as a pebble.

"But all the same you will have to stick it out for a couple of hours more, until we reach the next tavern, then you shall have a good rest."

And he patted the horse on the neck as he spoke, but the beast, though pricking up her ears, began to limp, apparently having gone lame in the off fore foot.

"Hello, hello! What is the trouble now?" pulling up the horse and dismounting.

He examined the hoof, and quickly discovered that an ugly-looking thorn, about an inch long, and nearly as hard as a bit of iron, had run into the hoof as if it had been driven there by human hands.

The rider surveyed the thorn, in questioning anxiety.

"This is a puzzle!" he exclaimed. "Can it be possible that this is an accident?

"If an accident it is the strangest I ever saw, but if the thorn was driven up into the hoof, who did it, and why was it done?"

The rider meditated upon this matter.

A half hour before he had come to where the road forked, and being uncertain which one of the two roads he ought to take had applied at a house which stood near by for information.

A couple of rough-looking men were playing cards in the house, which was one of the double log cabins, many of which are still to be found in the mountain region.

The men, although ill-looking fellows, were civil enough, and when informed that the horseman was on the way to Lexington, pressed him to remain over night with them, assuring him that it would be a couple of hours before he would find a tavern on ahead.

Something about the men the horseman did not like, so he pleasantly declined the invitation, saying that he was anxious to reach Lexington, where he expected to get work in connection with the races.

The men seemed disappointed and when they pressed him to dismount and take a drink with them, as he did not want to appear discourteous, he consented.

He put his horse in a tumble-down shed, then entered the house, where he remained for ten or twelve minutes, getting away as soon as possible.

Now his mind reverted to the occurrence.

There was ample time for any one to have tampered with the horse; but, why should anybody try a trick of the kind—what was the motive?

"Was it to force me to return and accept their hospitality?" he mused. "If so they made a mistake in their calculation, for, in the present condition of the horse I must seek the nearest shelter, and would naturally prefer to go on rather than to turn back."

"So cheer up, lady, for it cannot be far to the next house!"

Taking the horse's bridle the traveler went on, the horse limping along behind him.

A little way further on there was an abrupt turn in the road, and, as the horseman came around the bend his eyes were greeted by the sight of a comfortable-looking farmhouse, about a hundred yards ahead.

A spring on the roadside gushed out of the side of a rock bigger than an ordinary house, flowing down into a rude trough fashioned out of a huge log, and then wandered off down along the roadway.

A handsome, buxom, country girl, attired in a cheap calico dress, with bare head, and feet innocent of either shoes or stockings, was getting a pail of water at the well.

She was a trifle above the medium height, well developed and beautifully proportioned.

She had a clear red and white complexion, yet dark-brown hair, growing in luxuriant profusion, which she wore in a simple coil at the back of her head, and altogether was as fine a piece of Dame Nature's handiwork as a man would be apt to find in a long day's journey.

She had just filled the pail as the horseman made his appearance around the bend of the road, and she looked with wondering eyes upon the stranger, resting the pail upon the edge of the trough.

The turn of the road was such an abrupt one that the stranger was within twenty feet of the girl before either one was aware of the presence of the other.

The horseman made a polite bow as he came up to the girl.

"Good-day, miss," he said. "Can you tell me how far it is to the nearest tavern?"

"Yes, sir, it is about ten miles."

"Ten miles?"

"About that, sir, and they are pretty long miles, too. I know, for I walked over there and back one day, and although I am a good walker, I was tired all out when I got home."

"That is unfortunate," the horseman remarked. "My beast has gone lame all of a sudden and it will be a clear impossibility for her to go ten miles."

"Do you live at the house yonder?"

"Yes, sir."

"Will it be possible for me to get accommodation there for a day or two until my horse recovers sufficiently to go on?"

A troubled look appeared on the face of the girl as the stranger put the question, and she glanced at the house and then at the horseman in a peculiar way before she spoke. Then she said:

"Yes, I suppose that you could get accommodation, but I think it would be far better for you to go on if you possibly can."

"But it is not possible without torturing my poor beast. I have just pulled a large thorn out of his hoof, and if I can give her rest for a couple of days I do not think she will be hurt much."

"A large thorn in her hoof," the girl repeated, in a mechanical way, and again she glanced at the horse in the same peculiar manner as before.

"Yes, and it was a savage bit of wood—about as bad as a nail."

"In fact, if I had wanted to lame the horse so as to render her incapable of proceeding I could not have found a much better instrument for doing the work."

"But you do not think that anybody tried to disable your horse—you did not stop anywhere on the road above here?" the girl asked, rapidly, and with an anxious expression on her features.

"Only for a few moments at the next house above on the road," the horseman replied, in a careless way, but at the same time narrowly watching the girl's face, being careful though not to allow her to see that he was doing so.

"My cousins live there, and they surely would not do anything to injure your horse," the girl said slowly, and speaking as though she was trying to convince herself that what she said was the truth.

"Those two men are your cousins, eh?"

"Yes, and although they do seem to be rather rough fellows, yet I don't believe they would harm anybody."

"Oh, no, of course not!" the horseman exclaimed, in his cheery way!

"They were very anxious to have me stop over night with them, but as I was anxious to push on I was compelled to refuse their invitation."

"I did dismount though, and take a couple of drinks with them. Good whisky it was, too, yet I would be willing to bet a trifle that Uncle Sam never collected any tax on it."

"Yes, they say there is a good deal of illegal distilling going on in the mountains,

but I don't know anything about it!" the girl declared, in a half-frightened way.

"Of course not!" the horseman responded.

"Neither do I, and what is more I don't trouble my head about such matters, for I have all I can do to attend to my own business without busying myself about other people's affairs."

"Then you are not a Government spy?" the girl asked, and she looked at him as though she was inclined to believe that he was.

The horseman laughed outright.

"Oh, no, nothing of the kind. I am only a race-track sport on my way to attend the meeting at Lexington in hopes to be able to pick up a few honest dollars, there."

"You had better go on! I wouldn't stop if I were you!" the girl exclaimed, hurriedly and with an air which showed she was considerably troubled.

"Go on?" asked the sport in surprise.

"Yes, I would if I were you, and—"

Her speech was suddenly interrupted by the appearance of a rough-looking young man in the doorway of the house.

CHAPTER II.

THE COCK OF THE WALK.

THE girl was standing so that her side face was toward the house and she saw the young man as soon as he appeared.

"It is my brother, Jeff—please don't tell him that I advised you not to stop but to go on!" the girl exclaimed hurriedly.

"Oh, that is all right, I will not betray you!" the sport replied.

The young man, who was a tall, thin fellow with sallow features and a dissipated look advanced with rapid strides toward the two, and from the look upon his face the sport suspected that he mistrusted the girl had said something to him which she ought not to have spoken.

"How are ye, stranger?" the young man queried, with a rough attempt to appear civil.

"What on earth have you been talking about all this time, Sis?" he continued, addressing the girl.

"The gentleman was asking how far it was to the nearest tavern—" the girl explained.

"You ought to have told him that you didn't know, Sis," the young man remarked, assuming an appearance of extreme good nature.

"No need of any traveler hurrying forward to a tavern on account of night coming on while we have a house here," the young fellow asserted, advancing as he spoke.

"We don't set up to keep a tavern, of course, but we are always glad to have anybody stop with us and take pot-luck, and we always try our best to make 'em comfortable."

"I am very much obliged to you indeed for your invitation," the sport responded.

"My horse has suddenly fallen lame, and as this young lady tells me the nearest tavern is a good ten miles off, I am compelled to ask shelter of some one."

"You are as welcome, stranger, as the flowers in May," the young man exclaimed, grandiloquently.

"The latch-string of our house is always on the outside, and any stranger is heartily welcome."

"How might I call your name?"

"Jackson Blake," the horseman replied.

"I reckon that you are a stranger in these parts, for I don't remember to have ever seen you before."

"You are right about that. I am going through from Maysville on the Ohio to Lexington, to attend the race meeting."

"I am a sport, you see," Blake explained.

"And I was in hopes that I would be able to pick up some money down in Lexington."

"I should not be surprised if you did, for I understand that they are going to have an extra big meeting."

"Well, I need to tumble into a little streak of luck just now, for I don't mind telling you that I am about down to the bedrock, as mining sharps say out West."

"This poor beast represents about all my wealth. There was a fellow up Maysville

way who owed me quite a little sum of money, and as I heard he was getting on pretty well, I thought I would go up there and see if I couldn't make a raise, but when I hunted the man down I found out that he had all he could do to get along."

"That is the way with the most of the men who owe a fellow money."

"All he had that he could possibly spare was this horse."

"Well, she ain't a very good looking beast, but, mebbe, she might wake up if you come to put her on a track," the Kentuckian remarked, examining the horse with a critical air.

"She comes of a good line, Lexington, four-miler stock, so the blood is all right," the sport announced.

"Oh, yes, there isn't any discount on the Lexington stock!" the other declared.

"A better horse than old Lexington never looked through a bridle."

"And he had the power, too, to transmit a good many of his good qualities to his descendants," Blake observed.

"Yes, so I have always heard. Well, Mr. Blake, you are quite welcome to stop with us as long as you like," the Kentuckian remarked.

"My name is Jefferson Hawkins. Me and my brother William run this hyer farm, and Sis, hyer, who is our sister, keeps house for us. Her name is Belle."

Blake bowed as politely as though she had been the greatest lady in the land, then the brother said:

"Come right up to the house, and you kin put your beast in the shed. I reckon the lameness don't amount to much—picked up a stone perhaps."

"No, she had a thorn in her foot," Blake replied.

"One of the strangest things I ever saw! The thorn was run in as straight as though it had been intentionally driven in."

"You don't say so!" Hawkins exclaimed, a look of wonder appearing on his face so as to match his words, but there was a peculiar look in his eyes which did not escape the scrutiny of the keen-eyed sport.

"Yes, it is a very curious case; the thorn run in accidentally, of course, for no one would want to harm my horse," Blake asserted.

"No, of course not!" Hawkins declared. "Nobody wouldn't do nothing like that."

"But come up to the house, and we will do all we kin to make you comfortable."

Hawkins led the way, then came the sport with the horse, while the girl, bearing the pail of water, brought up the rear.

The horse was put in the shed, and Blake made a careful examination of the wound.

"I don't believe that a poultice is needed, but I can tell to-morrow," the sport remarked.

"If she is not better I will put one on."

"I reckon the brute will be all right by to-morrow, 'cos the hurt doesn't seem to be a very bad one," the Kentuckian declared.

"To-morrow will tell the story," Blake replied, as he quitted the shed which was about a hundred feet from the house.

The girl had gone in-doors with the water but re-appeared at the entrance as a lanky, raw-boned fellow rode up on a clay-bank colored horse.

"How ar' ye, Belle? You are looking jest as sweet as a posy to-day!" the new-comer declared.

Then he dismounted and advanced with outstretched hand to the girl.

She gave him her hand—rather reluctantly it seemed to Blake, and then, after shaking it for a moment the young fellow suddenly pulled the girl to him and endeavored to kiss her, a proceeding which she vigorously resisted.

The brother grinned as he witnessed the struggle, as though he considered it to be a good joke, but the light of indignation flamed in Blake's eyes.

"By Jove!" the sport exclaimed. "Why don't you slap that fellow's ears to teach him manners!"

The brother stared at the speaker in amazement.

"Why, it is all right," he explained. "That is only a way that Bub has. He don't mean no harm by it."

"That is Bub Thompson, and he is the cock of the walk in this hyer neighborhood;

there isn't a man 'round hyer fer twenty miles that dares to stand up to him."

"Well, he may be the big gun of this region but if the girl was my sister, I would not allow her to be hauled around in that way!" Blake exclaimed, already very "hot under the collar," as the saying is.

Those of our readers who have ever had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of Jackson Blake will remember that it was one of his peculiarities to interfere whenever injustice was being done, and the fact that the parties were strangers, and he really had no call to mix himself up with the affair, had no weight with him.

"It is all right," the brother repeated. "It is only Bub's fun, and he don't mean no harm; 'side he is sparkling Belle, and I reckon they will make a match of it one of these days, although Belle is as wild as a colt and makes out that she don't care nothing 'bout Bub at all."

"But I reckon she will come up to the scratch one of these days, 'cause both Bill and me think it would be an all-fired good match for her, for Bub is well fixed."

By this time the girl had succeeded in releasing herself from the grasp of the young man and, with flashing eyes and flaming cheeks, cried out:

"Don't you dare to do that again! I will not allow you or any other man to take such liberties with me."

"Go 'long! What are you giving me?" the suitor replied with a hoarse laugh.

"Do you s'pose I am going to come sparkling you for a year and a day without even getting a kiss for my pains once in a while, hey?"

"I don't want you to come and see me, as I have told you fifty times!" the girl retorted in fiery indignation.

"Your room is a deal better than your company."

"You don't mean that now, for sure!" the swain declared tauntingly.

"Yes, I do! indeed I do, every word of it! I don't like you, and I wish you would keep away!"

"Ah, you are only talking now for the sake of hearing yourself talk!" the man asserted.

"You know very well that if I should take you at your word and go arter some other gal you would never forgive me."

"Wouldn't I?" the girl exclaimed in hot indignation.

"Just you try it for a little while and see how it will work! A mighty good opinion you must have of yourself to imagine that I care two straws about you either one way or the other!"

"What is the use of your fooling in this way when you know that you are going to marry me as soon as I get ready to have you!" the young fellow declared.

"Indeed I am not!" And the girl flushed crimson at the idea.

"Yes, you are; your brothers are both willing, I am willing, and you will have to be, I reckon, whether you want to or not."

"I hate and despise you and I will never marry a man like yourself!"

"Say, I reckon I will have to have a kiss from you now anyway, or else, mebbe I might begin to believe that you mean what you say, and I know you don't!"

CHAPTER III.

BLAKE INTERFERES.

THE young fellow was so near the girl that she could not avoid him, but when he advanced with outstretched arms to grasp the girl, who on her part prepared for a desperate resistance, Blake sprung forward, greatly to the astonishment of the brother who was taken completely by surprise for he did not anticipate any such movement.

"Hello, you! stop that—let the girl alone!" the sport exclaimed in the sharp quick accents of command.

The young man halted immediately, so much surprised at being addressed in this way that he could hardly believe that he had heard aright.

"Eh, what is that?"

"It is I who spoke—and I told you to let that girl alone!" Blake replied, hastening forward with eager steps.

An expression of the utmost astonishment

was on the face of the young man as he surveyed the new-comer.

"Who in blazes are you?" he exclaimed.

"My name is Jackson Blake!"

"I reckon that you are a stranger in this neighborhood," the young man remarked in a slow and dogged way, the look of astonishment vanishing, and one of sullen anger taking its place.

"You reckon right, I am a stranger."

"And you never heered of me, I s'pose."

"You are right again! I don't know you from a side of sole-leather!"

"There ain't any need of having any trouble 'bout this thing," the brother remarked at this point, anxious to arrange matters.

"I reckon that we won't have much trouble unless you are a blamed sight better man than I take you to be!" Bub Thompson remarked in an extremely insolent way.

"Whether I am good, bad or indifferent I reckon too that there will not be much trouble," Blake retorted.

"This hyer is a stranger whose horse fell lame on the road, and he is going to stop with us until the beast kin go on," the brother explained.

"What are you—some blamed revenue spy?" Bub Thompson asked in accents of supreme contempt.

"Nary spy, and the man who says so lies in his teeth!" responded Blake, promptly.

The reader who knows Jackson Blake will remember that he was never backward in coming forward.

"What is that?" cried the young Kentuckian, doubling up his fists and taking a step forward.

"I reckon that you don't know what you are saying, nor who you are talking to."

"I have half-killed men for a mighty sight less talk than this hyer!"

"Say, Jeff, I reckon you had better tell this cuss who I am."

"Jest give him to understand, you know, that when he runs up against me he is tackling the best man in this hyer deestruck."

"That is so, stranger," the brother asserted.

"Bub hyer is the champion of these parts," Jefferson Hawkins declared.

"I ain't one of the kind who brags much either," the lanky young man remarked.

"But you kin bet your life that I am able to make it hot for any two-legged critter that is around here for a good twenty miles, and I don't have to more than half try either."

"Astonishing as it may appear to you I am not at all worried by your statement," the sport replied.

"You may be the best man in all this state of Kentucky, but that fact would not prevent me from telling you that you must not annoy this young lady."

"B'gosh! I will have to smash you!" the young fellow exclaimed in a rage.

"Hold on, Bub!" the brother cried, anxious to prevent a difficulty. "I wouldn't have no fuss if I were you."

"This hyer stranger don't know what a powerful critter you are when you git riled, and he means all all right."

"You mus'n't mind what Sis says," Jefferson Hawkins explained, addressing Blake in a conciliatory way.

"She likes Bub well enough, but, as I told you, she is as wild as a colt and will act in this fool way every once in a while."

"But gals will cut up jest such monkey shins, you know."

"Brother Bill and me have fixed the match all right 'tween her and Bub hyer, and when the time comes she will git hitched without any trouble."

"Don't be too sure about that!" the girl exclaimed, evidently greatly exasperated.

"You have settled the affair without taking the trouble to consult me, but you may find that I intend to have something to say on the subject."

"There; do you see what this hyer man's interference has done?" the lanky youth declared.

The gal never thought of kicking up a row 'bout this hyer thing until he stuck his spoon in the soup, and I have got to smash him so that he will larn that he better mind his own business."

"You are a sort of a guileless youth," the sport remarked, in an extremely sarcastic way.

"One of the kind of fellows that a man like myself is apt to feel sorry for on account of his ignorance."

"You feel sorry for me?" Bub Thompson blurted out in great astonishment.

"Yes, because you don't know anything!" Blake retorted.

"Now just hold your horses for a while until I explain this case to you."

"You think you are a great warrior, and I don't doubt that you have held your own with the country gawks with whom you have contended, but when you come to try on a man like myself you will speedily discover that you are not in it at all."

"Do you go for to say that you kin stand up ag'in' me?" the lank Kentuckian demanded, very much surprised.

"Yes, I do, and if you should be fool enough to attack me I would undoubtedly give you the soundest thrashing that ever a man got; that is, provided you have the sand to come up to the scratch and take your gruel like a man."

All of the hearers looked at the sport in surprise.

The confident manner in which he spoke surprised them, for his appearance did not indicate to them that he possessed any unusual powers in the fighting line.

If he had been a giant of a fellow, a six-footer, and built accordingly, they might have thought he would be able to put up a good fight, but as he appeared to be only an ordinary-sized man, they were puzzled by the confidence he displayed.

"B'gosh!" Bub Thompson exclaimed, in wonder. "If you ain't the biggest blower that I ever struck then I don't want a cent!"

"Oh, no, I am only telling you the truth as you will discover before you get through with me!" Blake retorted.

"You are apparently a bigger man than I am, but in reality your size does not give you the least advantage, for you are badly put together, and hav'n't got the stamina to stand hard knocks."

"I will soon show you what I kin stand!" the Kentuckian exclaimed in a rage, for he did not relish being talked to in this fashion.

And with the words he made a rush at the sport.

Blake had been keeping a close watch on the other, and so he was not taken by surprise.

Thompson tried the usual game of the man who is not an expert boxer—throwing his power in a desperate right-hand swing.

The sport, having taken the measure of his man, expected just such an attack, and so was on his guard.

By a nimble duck of the head he dodged the blow, and at the same time planted a most terrific right-hander on the body of the lanky Kentuckian, the blow alighting just over the heart.

Bub Thompson doubled up immediately, jackknife fashion, and went over on his back.

Never before in all his life had he got such a blow.

The breath was about knocked out of him, and as he lay on the ground he gasped like a man who had received a mortal stroke.

The younger Hawkins brother, William by name, made his appearance from the house at this time.

He had watched the fight from the window, but when he realized that the stranger was likely to prove a match for the redoubtable Bub, he was eager to get a nearer view of the struggle.

Like the majority of the mountaineers, though, both of the Hawkinses were lovers of fair play, and so they were willing to give the stranger a show for his money.

It was fully a minute before Bub Thompson recovered sufficiently to get on his feet.

His face was dark with rage as he again faced the stranger.

"You think you are mighty smart, I reckon, but I will show you afore we get through with this thing that you ain't the only man in the world who kin do some fighting!" the Kentuckian declared.

"Hold on a moment!" Blake exclaimed. "What sort of a fight is this to be, anyway? London prize-ring rules, Marquis of Queensberry, or the good old-fashion rough and tumble?"

"I reckon that rough and tumble is good enough for me!" the Kentuckian re-

plied with an ugly scowl, "squaring off" at his antagonist.

"All right! that suits me!" Blake replied.

And then, to the surprise of all, he made a sudden rush at his opponent, feinted with his right at Thompson's head, then with the left at the body, and then, catching the Kentuckian off his guard, banged him in the jaw with his right fist, again sending the man to the ground.

Thompson was so exasperated by this second knock-down that he was fairly beside himself with rage.

He rose immediately, determined upon closing in upon his antagonist, having come to the conclusion that he did not stand any chance with him at long range.

But Blake, having secured a decided lead, intended to keep it, and he proceeded to knock the Kentuckian down as fast as he arose.

And each time that Thompson got on his feet he was weaker and more unsteady than before, and, finally, Blake got in a terrific left-hander on the point of the jaw which rendered Bub Thompson "dead to the world" as the sporting writers say.

The Kentuckian was knocked out.

The wonder of the brothers was unbounded.

It was the first time that they had ever seen a scientific boxer exert his powers, and they could not understand it.

The sport was apparently able to hit his opponent when and where he pleased, while the Kentuckian could not get in a blow.

"I don't know whether he has got enough or not," Blake remarked, as he folded his arms across his chest and surveyed his prostrate opponent.

"But if he has not, there is plenty more in the same shop, and I am ready to face him until he is satisfied."

The brothers stared in amazement. What sort of a man was this stranger?

CHAPTER IV.

THE MOUNTAINEER IS SATISFIED.

"STRANGER, you are a wonder and no mistake!" Jeff Hawkins declared.

"I'll be durned if you don't beat any man in the fightin' line that was ever in this hyer destrict!" the younger brother declared.

"Oh, yes, you rank away at the top of the heap, and no mistake," Jeff Hawkins asserted.

"But at the same time I must say without meaning any offense, you know, that it seems to me that you are a trifle fresh, for there wasn't really any reason for you to interfere in this hyer matter."

"Too fresh, eh?" the sport exclaimed with a laugh.

"Yas, that is really the way it seems to me," Jeff Hawkins replied.

"Well, perhaps I am; in fact, I don't think there is a doubt about it, for I have been told so fully a hundred times," the sport remarked in a meditative way.

"But it is my nature; I can't help it. I have always been this way, and, of course, I shall keep on to the end of the chapter."

"I am very much obliged to you, I am sure, sir!" the girl exclaimed at this point.

"I do not like this man who is impudent enough to think that he can marry me whenever he pleases, but as both my brothers have favored his suit I have never dared until to-day to show any decided opposition."

"You are the biggest kind of a fool, Belle, not to have him!" the elder brother exclaimed in an angry way.

"He is the biggest catch of any man in this hyer section!" William Hawkins declared.

"I don't care whether he is or not!" the girl retorted, her temper evidently aroused.

"I will not have him and the quicker both you and he make up your minds to that the better!"

Then, with an air full of defiance, she retreated into the house.

"Stranger, I don't want to pick any quarrel with you, but I must say that a heap of this is all your fault," the elder brother remarked with a reproachful air.

"Do you think so?" Blake asked.

"Sart'in I dol!" Jeff Hawkins declared.

"We never had any trouble with the gal until to-day, although Bub has been a-sparking of her for nigh onter six months."

"But your coming hyer seemed to put the devil in her, and now, I s'pose, we will have a lively time to git her to marry the man."

"If she objects to him why do you try to force her into the match?" the sport asked.

"She ain't anything but a fool gal, and she don't know what is good for her," William Hawkins exclaimed.

"We are her brothers, and we think we have got the right to say who she shall marry," the elder brother remarked in a dogged way.

"But the girl is of age though, I should judge, and when you come down to the legal rights of the thing it seems to me that she has a right to marry who she pleases," the sport argued.

"Well, we don't go much on the law up hyer in the mountains, Jeff Hawkins observed in a dogged and defiant way.

"We reckon, Bill and me, that we are going to settle this hyer thing in our own way and if anybody goes for to interfere the man is likely to get hurt."

"Do you mean that for me?" exclaimed the sport immediately, always ready to take the bull by the horns, as the saying is.

There was an exchange of glances between the brothers, and then Jeff Hawkins responded in a rather sheepish way:

"Why, no, I don't see why you should want to mix yourself up in the matter at all, and of course, we ain't got anything ag'in' you on account of your fight with Bub, 'cos we have enough to do to attend to our own affairs without troubling our head about other people's."

The exchange of glances between the brothers had not escaped the quick eyes of the sport, and the conclusion to which he came was that the pair were no friends of his, but were afraid to come out and say so.

By this time consciousness had returned to Bub Thompson.

He sat up and looked around him in a dazed sort of way as if he did not exactly know what had occurred.

When his eyes fell upon the sport though he shook his head, evidently profoundly amazed.

The Kentuckian showed only too plainly that he had been roughly handled.

Both his eyes were blackened, his nose swollen to twice its usual size, and there was an ugly cut under his left eye.

To use the old expression, he presented the appearance of a man who had been run through a thrashing machine.

"Well, sir, I am waiting on you," the sport remarked, assuming a pugilistic attitude.

Thompson rose slowly to his feet, surveyed Blake for a moment with an expression of wonder on his battered up countenance and then said:

"I reckon that I have got all I want of you for the present."

"You are satisfied then?" the sport inquired.

"Yes, you are too much for me. I wouldn't have believed it, but it is so, b'gosh!"

"Well, if you remember, I gave you fair warning in the beginning," the sharp observed. "But you were obstinate and wouldn't have it."

"I have got a lesson which will last me for one while, I reckon!" Bub Thompson declared with a doleful look.

"If you are wise you will not want a second one of the same sort for a good long time."

"I will never want it, I reckon," the Kentuckian replied with a grimace.

"I didn't think the man stood in shoe leather who could whale me the way you have to-day, but now I am satisfied that there's a heap of things in this hyer world that I don't know."

"I don't bear any malice, you understand," he added. "It was a fair fight and you warmed me for keeps!"

"Well, I am glad that you look at the matter in that way, and I can assure you that there isn't any hard feeling on my side, either."

"So-long! I must be going," the Kentuckian said, moving toward his horse.

"Hold on! won't you come in and have a

drink before you go, Bub?" Jeff Hawkins asked.

"No, I won't go in, thank you, but if you will bring out the bottle I will take a swig out here."

"I will fetch it out in a jiffy!" the younger brother declared.

Then he hastened into the house, returning in a few moments with a whisky flask in one hand and a pitcher of water in the other.

"Let the stranger sample it first," Thompson son remarked.

"Go ahead, and if it don't kill you right off, I will risk it," Blake observed.

Then they all took a drink in the good old western fashion, the bottle in one hand, and the water-pitcher in the other.

First a generous draught of the potent liquor, then a swallow of water.

"How may I call your name?" Thompson asked after he had mounted his horse.

"Jackson Blake."

"You are the best man that ever struck this hyer section and no mistake. Be good to yourself." And then the discomfited mountaineer rode off.

CHAPTER V.

A WARNING.

THE three watched the horseman until he disappeared around the bend in the road, then Jeff Hawkins drew a long breath, and turning to the sport, said:

"I tell you what it is, stranger, it is lucky for you that Bub was satisfied to leave off without pulling his gun."

"Oh, he is on the shoot sometimes, then?" Blake remarked in an inquisitive way.

"Oh, yes, and he is a powerful good shot too," Jeff Hawkins asserted.

"One of the best men with a gun up in this hyer region," the younger brother added.

"It is a lucky thing for me then, possibly, that he did not take it into his head to make a shooting match out of it" and Blake laughed as though he considered the matter to be a good joke.

The brothers looked at the speaker in a dubious way, for they did not know exactly what to make of him.

"It would have been bloody murder if he had once pulled his gun," Jeff Hawkins declared.

"Perhaps you are good in that way, too?" the younger brother suggested.

"Well, I can manage to hit the side of a barn if it isn't too far off," Blake answered.

"I s'pose you are well heeled, of course," Jeff Hawkins remarked, with an inquisitive glance at the sport, as though looking for weapons.

"With truth I cannot say that I am," the sport replied. "I am not well heeled with either money or weapons. The horse represents about the extent of my cash capital, and in a quiet, peaceful country like this I did not think there was any need of a man going around armed to the teeth."

"Good weapons cost good money, you know, and at present I am not flush enough to indulge in any business."

"It is a peaceable country enough, with the exception of a bad gang who are supposed to have their haunt up in these mountains," the elder brother observed.

"A bad gang, eh?"

"Yes, the Yellow Beards they call themselves," Jeff Hawkins explained.

"The Yellow Beards?" the sport asked, evidently surprised.

"Yes, that is what the fellows are named."

"They got the name because all the members of the gang have yellow beards," the younger brother explained.

"Yellow beards for sure?" Blake asked.

"Well, no one knows the truth about that," Jeff Hawkins answered.

"It may be that the beards are natural ones, but most people think they are false."

"Worn for a disguise, I presume?" Blake said.

"Yes, that is what most people think."

"And these fellows are bad eggs, eh?"

"You bet!" Jeff Hawkins cried, emphatically. "There has been a couple of trains robberies on the Louisville and Nashville road, and the detectives are satisfied that the gang who did the work came from this destrict."

"But no detective has been smart enough to nail any of the gang, eh?" the sport asked, in a reflective way.

"No, not yet," Jeff Hawkins answered.

"Is there any reward offered for the apprehension of the men?" the sport questioned.

"Yes, five thousand dollars by the railroad and the Express company," William Hawkins replied.

"That would be a very tidy sum to pick up, but I suppose that, like all things of that kind, it is hedged around with such conditions that an ordinary man would not stand much chance of winning the boodle?"

"I reckon that anybody who tried to capture such desperate fellows as these Yellow Beards would stand more chance of getting killed than he would of picking up any money," Jeff Hawkins remarked.

"Not a speculation to be recommended to a prudent man, eh?" the sport asked with a laugh.

"Well, I don't want any of it in mine!" Jeff Hawkins responded.

"I wouldn't risk it fer the best farm there is in this hyer State of Kentucky!" the younger brother declared.

"I reckon you are right. A man would be putting up a very desperate game indeed to attempt to capture any of these outlaws single-handed, and although I think I have about as much courage as the next man yet if I thought of trying anything of this kind I should prefer to have about a dozen men with me."

"That kind of a game has been tried, but it did not work," the elder Hawkins explained.

"These Yellow Beards are supposed to do a lot of whisky-making up in the mountains and they never take the trouble to give in a report to the Government officers," Jeff explained.

"So they don't go through the formality of paying the tax?" the sport questioned.

"No, they do not, so the revenue officers have done their best to catch them, but the mountain-men are too smart for them."

"It is mighty dangerous business for strangers to try to run men down in their own stamping-grounds," Blake declared.

"Yes, and the officers have never succeeded in getting a man yet, although the Government spies have tried a dozen times, but three or four of the revenue men have either been killed or badly wounded."

"It is like bearding a lion in his den," the sport observed.

"Yes, it is mighty risky business," Jeff Hawkins responded with a weighty shake of the head. "But come in the house and make yourself comfortable. The sun is going down, and I reckon the gal will soon have supper ready."

"I think I will do justice to it, for I hav'n't eaten anything since dinner, and then I only had a scant meal," the sport remarked.

"We kin give you plenty of hay and hominy, and I reckon you kin manage to git along on that," the elder Hawkins remarked with a grin.

"Oh, yes, a man who isn't satisfied with good old Kentucky hog and hominy must be hard to please."

The brothers then ushered the sport into the house, where the girl was busily engaged in getting supper.

The three sat down, the brothers produced pipes and tobacco, and they enjoyed a smoke, conversing the while.

The sport soon made the discovery that the brothers were not inclined to believe his story that he was merely a traveler passing through the country on his way to Lexington.

The pair did not openly express any doubt, but they put sly questions to him, acting as if they thought they could entrap him into making some unguarded admission.

But as the sport had really told the truth about the matter, the brothers did not succeed in their design.

Then, just as supper was being put upon the table, a neighbor drove up, coming after a fat hog which he thought of purchasing.

The bargain was soon made, and the brothers went with the farmer to put the porker in the wagon.

This left Blake alone with the girl, and she improved the opportunity to speak to him.

"I am very much obliged to you indeed for interfering on my behalf," she said, gratefully.

"Don't mention it!" the sport replied.

"It isn't in my nature to stand idly by and see a lady hauled about by a rough fellow like this elongated greenhorn, and it wasn't any trouble for me to polish him off."

"One good turn deserves another they say," the girl remarked, speaking rapidly, and taking a position by the window so that she would be able to watch for the return of her brothers.

"Yes, that is an old saying, and one with a great deal of truth in it, undoubtedly."

"You came to my assistance and now I will try to aid you, for I think you are in danger."

"Is that possible?" the sport asked in surprise.

"Yes, I believe that it is the truth. I do not know for certain, you know, I am only guessing at it."

"I understand."

"In the beginning when I had the conversation with you at the spring, and you told me about your horse going lame, the idea came to me at once that the beast had been lamed on purpose."

"Well, I had an idea of that kind myself, but I could not see why anybody should want to do anything of the kind."

"I do not know—I cannot guess, but if anything was done to the horse, my cousins at the house where you stopped are none too good to do such a trick."

"It struck me at the time that they did not present the appearance of honest men."

"They have been in trouble half-a-dozen times, nothing particularly serious, but enough to give them a bad reputation," the girl said with a melancholy air.

"My own brothers too do not bear a good name, for the revenue officers have been after them, but so far the Government men have never been able to secure any proof."

"They and my cousins are on the most intimate terms, and one of my cousins was at the house a short time before you came, and held a whispered conversation with Jeff. By means of a short cut over the hills it is only about half as far to my cousins' house as it is by the road."

"Do you think that this man came to warn your brother of my approach?" Blake asked in a thoughtful way.

"I think so now, for my cousin acted in a very mysterious way and after he departed both of my brothers sat by the window and kept watch on the road, just as if they expected some one."

"It was my idea that they had been running a still up in the mountains, and were afraid that the revenue officers had got on their track."

"Can it be possible that they take me to be a Government spy?"

"Yes, I should not be surprised if they did, and I am afraid that they intend to do you a mischief."

"I will be on my guard, of course, but they never made a greater mistake in their lives!" the sport declared.

"Of course, it may be possible that I am wrong, but my apprehensions have been excited and I thought that I ought to warn you."

"I am very much obliged indeed, and if it is a false alarm no harm will be done. Anyway, I will be on my guard."

The approach of the brothers brought the conversation to an end at this point.

CHAPTER VI.

NOCTURNAL VISITORS.

THE brothers were in high glee for they had made a good trade.

Supper was served, hog and hominy with wild honey, home-made biscuits and strong coffee, a very excellent meal for a hungry man, and Blake did full justice to the repast.

Then after the table was cleared, pipes and tobacco were again produced, and the three men smoked and chatted for an hour or so.

By this time the girl had the room tidied up and departed.

"I am mighty sorry that you interfered 'tween Sis and her fellow to-day," Jeff Hawkins remarked in a reflective way.

"The gal is kinder inclined to be obstinate, and I am afraid she won't take kindly to Bub Thompson after the hiding he got from you. Lordy! how you did pound him!"

"It is a peculiarity of my nature that when I see any trouble of the kind going on I feel an irresistible inclination to take a hand in the affair," the sport explained.

"It is a pity, for I am afraid that not only will the gal take it into her head to be contrary, but Bub will kinder kick over the traces."

"You see, stranger, Bub is the best catch of any fellow in these parts. He has got the best farm in this destrict, and a lot of money hired out, too."

"Well this is a very uncertain world, you know, and we cannot always have things as we like," the sport observed with the air of a philosopher.

"Sart'in; that is so," the younger brother observed.

By this time the three had finished their pipes, and Jeff Hawkins suggested that a "leettle game of draw" wouldn't come amiss.

"Jest a leettle game at a quarter ante," he explained. "Jest enough to make the thing interesting, and help to pass the time away, for we ain't in the habit of going to roost before ten or eleven o'clock."

"I'm agreeable, although I haven't got much money to lose," the sport responded.

"At a quarter ante you cannot lose much money, if you have any kind of luck," the younger brother declared.

"That is true," Blake asserted. "And I don't mind taking a hazzard at it."

The cards were produced, and the game began.

Those readers who know aught of Jackson Blake, the Fresh of Frisco, understand full well what kind of a man he was, and to those who now make the acquaintance of the gentleman for the first time we will say that Blake was one of those marvelous men, who, besides being a magnificent player, could do almost anything with cards, being equal to any conjurer who ever gained a living by showing the public at large that fingers are much quicker than eyes.

And being an expert in all that appertained to cards and card-playing, it did not take the sport long to discover that the brothers were a pair of clumsy sharpers, who, not having the brains to play a good game, endeavored to make up for their lack of skill by cheating.

Blake chuckled in his sleeve, for he saw that he was in for an evening of rare amusement, for what greater sport could there be for a man like himself than to bear a couple of clumsy tricksters at their own game?

And the sport managed the matter so well that the others hadn't the least suspicion that they were playing with one of the most expert gamblers that ever flipped a card.

Neither of the brothers had much wealth, twenty odd dollars constituted their entire capital, but by the time that the hands on the old-fashioned clock pointed to the hour of eleven Blake had possession of the cash.

Never were two men much more puzzled than the pair, for Blake managed the matter so skillfully that the brothers had no idea that they were playing with a really wonderful gamester.

Apparently, Blake won by sheer dumb luck, and skill did not have anything to do with it.

The brothers were extremely disgusted, but not being able to solve the mystery they came to the conclusion that the stranger was the luckiest man they had ever encountered.

No suspicion entered their minds that the sport was an expert sharper who knew enough not only to detect the fact whenever they rung in a "cold deal" on him, but was able to "stack the cards" so as to give what hands he pleased.

Under such circumstances it was no wonder that the sport cleaned out the brothers.

"B'gosh! stranger, you have had the biggest run of luck that I ever see'd!" Jeff Hawkins declared.

"If you had been backing ag'in'a faro-bank to-night you would have bu'sted the consarn all to smash even if there was twenty or thirty thousand dollars back of it."

"I am generally mighty lucky at cards,

although I don't pretend to know much about them," Blake remarked, in a modest way.

"I reckon that you know enough to hold your own," Bill Hawkins remarked, with a woeful air, as he contemplated the empty canvas bag in which he had carried his wealth.

"Let us have a drink and go to bed," the younger brother suggested.

"A motion like that is always in order," the sport assented.

The whisky was produced, the three took a hearty drink, and then Jeff Hawkins said he would show Blake to his room.

This proved to be an apartment on the ground floor in an ell of the house.

It was a good-sized room, about twelve feet square, but rather scantily furnished, only containing a small bed, a table and a couple of chairs.

Besides the door which led into the apartment from the sitting-room, there was another one opening into the yard, and a window looking out on the road.

Jeff Hawkins placed the candle, which he carried in his hand, on the table.

"I reckon that you kin manage to pass a comfortable night in this hyer room," he said.

"We don't go much on style, you know, but reckon to have a heap of comfort."

"Oh, this will do nicely, and as I am rather tired after my journey I don't doubt that I will sleep soundly enough."

The Kentuckian then bid Blake good-night and departed.

As soon as he was alone the sport proceeded to examine the room.

There was no fastening upon the door which led into the sitting-room, and the one which gave entrance to the open air had only a common lock upon it.

"Almost any key would open it," Blake soliloquized as he examined the lock.

Then he sat down and proceeded to meditate upon the situation.

"Now then, what kind of a game are these people likely to play?" he mused.

"In the first place I do not think there is a doubt but what they have got the idea into their heads that I am a spy, and a spy could have two objects in coming up into this country; he might be trying to get on the track of these Yellow Beards, or seeking to discover the men who run stills up in this region and manufacture illicit whisky."

"In either case the spy would be risking his life, for if his errand was discovered he would be killed without mercy."

"Then too it may be possible that these people have in some mysterious way got the impression, possibly because I am tolerably well-dressed, that I may carry considerable money with me, and robbery is a part of the game."

"Now from which quarter is the attack most likely to come?"

The sport meditated for a few moments over this problem.

"From the outside, I think, but I will take the precaution to arrange matters so it will not be possible for any one to get into the room in either direction without making some noise."

Luckily for the sport both of the doors opened into the room, so that it was not a hard matter for him to barricade the entrances.

Against the door which led into the inner room he placed a chair, wedging the top of the back under the latch in such a way that it was impossible to open the door without using a great amount of force.

The latch of the other door was so high that he could not fit the chair under it, and therefore he placed the table against the door and tilted a chair on the top of the table in such a way that any attempt to open the door would bring the chair to the floor.

"I have heard of trap-doors in houses of this kind where unwary travelers were lured to their doom," Blake remarked with a meditative air after the preparations were completed.

The sport then proceeded to see if there was a trap door under the bed.

As there was no carpet on the floor it was an easy matter to discover whether there was a trap-door or not.

A minute's investigation satisfied the sport that there wasn't any trap-door.

Then he prepared to go to rest, but not on the bed.

As he expected an attack he thought it would be wiser for him not to occupy the bed, so he took off the blanket with the pillow, and arranged a bunk in the corner of the room, behind the door which led to the inner apartment.

"Now, then, if I have visitors during the night the chances are a hundred to one that they will make a rush for the bed," the sport soliloquized as he stretched himself out in the corner. "And if they do not find me there, the circumstance will be apt to embarrass them."

This struck the sharp as being rather funny, so he indulged in a quiet laugh as he blew out the candle.

Having been in the saddle for the greater part of the day, the sport was tolerably tired, so it was not many minutes after he closed his eyes before he was in the land of dreams.

For a good two hours he slumbered peacefully, and then he was awakened by a tremendous crash.

The outer door had been opened, and the table and chair violently overthrown.

The nocturnal visitors, whom the sport expected, had arrived.

CHAPTER VII.

A WARM RECEPTION.

THE sport had taken the precaution to see that the two revolvers which he carried were in good working order before retiring to rest, and it only took him a second to draw them.

The sport was "well-heeled" as far as weapons went, although he had not thought it wise to enlighten the Hawkins brothers in regard to this point when he was questioned by them about his arms.

Both of his weapons were self-cocking revolvers, good-sized pistols of 40-caliber, and so carrying a ball of sufficient size to stop a wild bull in his tracks.

Affairs transpired just as the sport had anticipated.

The nocturnal visitors were completely astonished when the crash took place, for they had not expected anything of the kind, and so were taken entirely by surprise, for it had been their game to steal in quietly upon their prey.

When the crash came, violent enough to wake the soundest sleeper, they realized that there was no hope of attacking their destined victim in his sleep, and so they rushed into the room and precipitated themselves upon the bed, expecting to seize the sport in their clutches.

And as he was not there the assailants, in the darkness, got hold of each other by mistake and a lively rough and tumble fight took place on the bed.

The bedstead had not been constructed to stand such rough usage, and giving way under the strain came with a crash to the ground.

Just about this time Blake concluded that the moment had arrived for him to take a hand in the affair.

With both revolvers he opened fire, but as he was inclined to be merciful, not feeling like slaying his midnight visitors in cold blood, he aimed high.

The nocturnal visitors had been considerably astonished when the crash took place, but when the two revolver shots rang in their ears they became panic-stricken.

The fellows who had got hold of each other in the darkness, each imagining that the other was the man the gang sought to make a victim, relinquished their hold, and with the rest, scrambling to their feet, made a rush for the open door.

There was a faint moon, so enough light was afforded the intruders to enable them to see where they were going.

As the men rushed through the door Blake was able to distinguish that there were four of them, and they had disguised themselves with black masks.

Blake hastened to the door and amused himself by sending a couple of shots after the fleeing men.

"This has been quite a surprise party!" the sport ejaculated.

"It is true that these mysterious gentlemen intended it to be something of the kind."

but the affair did not turn out exactly as they thought.

"It was their idea to surprise me, but I flatter myself that I managed the matter so that their surprise was much greater than mine."

Then the sport chuckled grimly.

"I suppose my hosts will make their appearance in a few moments, anxious to learn the meaning of the disturbance, that is unless they were members of this gang, and if that is the case it will take them some time to recover from the astonishment into which I threw them."

"I may as well prepare for their visit though."

Then Blake closed the door and lit the candle.

As soon as the light illuminated the apartment he proceeded to examine the door through which the intruders had come.

As he anticipated it had not been forced but unlocked, for the key was still in the outside of the door.

"That is tolerably conclusive proof that my hosts were concerned in this affair," the sport soliloquized.

"They will undoubtedly make their appearance in a few moments so I must prepare for their coming."

He replaced the pillow and blanket on the bed, and removing the chairs which had wedged against the door sat down to await the appearance of the Hawkins brothers.

It was a good ten minutes before they came.

Then the door which led into the inner room was opened cautiously and Jeff Hawkins peeped into the room.

"Come in! everything is all right!" the sharp exclaimed encouragingly.

Thus admonished Jeff Hawkins advanced into the room followed by his brother.

Both of the men showed evident signs of having been in trouble.

Jeff had a black eye, while Bill Hawkins's nose was discolored, and swollen, just as if it had come in violent contact with somebody's fist.

The brothers advanced into the room in an extremely sheepish, hang-dog way, and they assumed a look of intense surprise as they surveyed the broken bed.

"I have been having a regular pic-nic here!" the sport exclaimed in his cheerful, light-hearted way.

"I happen to be an extremely light sleeper, and a very slight noise is sufficient to wake me up," he explained.

"So when some fellows got to monkeying at the door there which leads into the yard, I caught on to them immediately."

"Did anybody try to get in?" Jeff Hawkins asked, affecting to be very much astonished.

"Did they?" the sport exclaimed. "Well now you can just bet your boots they did, and there was a small army of them, too, eight or ten, I should judge, but it was so dark, of course, that I couldn't see to count them."

"But they didn't get hold of you?" Jeff Hawkins queried.

"Oh, no, I hopped up mighty lively when I heard them fooling around the door, and took refuge in a corner, where I opened fire on them with my revolver."

"Oh, yes, we heard the shots, and didn't know what on earth to make of it," the younger brother asserted.

"They left very sudden after I opened fire on them," Blake declared.

"I couldn't take good aim in the darkness, but I have an idea that I peppered a couple of them, for I heard them yell as they run away."

"You might look out in the yard and see if there are any of them lying around loose out there."

"B'gosh! this is about the greatest affair that I ever heard of in all my time," Jeff Hawkins observed, as he went to the door and looked out into the darkness.

"Yes, it just beats all!" the younger brother declared.

"Jeff and I sleep in the same room, but in different beds, and when you fired the shots we jumped up in such a hurry that we bumped into each other in the darkness with such force that we both keeled over."

"Ah, yes, I can see the marks on your faces," the sport observed.

"Then we had to get a light and fix our we'pons, for it sounded as though there was bloody murder going on."

"I don't wonder that you were alarmed, and it is not surprising that under the circumstances it took you some time to come to my assistance," Blake remarked.

"We didn't know what to think about the thing, and it took Jeff and me quite a little while for to make up our minds what to do."

"Very natural, indeed!" the sport assented.

"I don't see or hear anything," Jeff Hawkins remarked at this point, closing the door.

"I don't suppose that I did lay any of them out, though I imagined that I winged a couple of them," Blake explained.

"But it was so dark that I couldn't be sure about the matter."

"Blamed if I know what to make of it!" Jeff Hawkins declared with a weighty shake of the head.

"Well, I presume that some of the hard cases of the neighborhood got the notion that because I was a stranger, and had on a decent suit of clothes, I must carry a lot of wealth around with me," the sport remarked.

"Yes, mebbe they did," Jeff Hawkins assented, and he looked at the sport in a way which seemed to signify that he had considerable curiosity himself in regard to the matter.

"If they had succeeded in getting at my wealth, I fancy they would have been very much disgusted with the smallness of the amount," the sport said with a laugh.

"With the exception of the Yellow Beards there isn't any bad characters in this neighborhood that I know on," Jeff Hawkins observed.

"And I don't reckon that high-toned robbers like the Yellow Beards, would trouble themselves to go for a man unless they felt sart'in that they were going to get a good stake out of the thing."

"Well, I should not imagine that they would, but there is one thing certain, some fellows went for me; of course, I don't know what they wanted, but the natural supposition is that they were after plunder."

"Mebbe it was some friends of Bub Thompson," Jeff Hawkins suggested.

"You whaled him awfully and some chums of his'n might have made up their minds to get squar' with you."

"Yes, that is not unlikely, and I will make it my business to-morrow to hunt up Mr. Bub Thompson and see what he has to say about the matter!" the sport declared in his brisk way.

The brothers stared at Blake for a moment in surprise.

"Going to hunt him up?" Jeff Hawkins queried.

"That will be my leetle game!" Blake responded.

"I reckon that if you do that you will be in for another fight," the elder Hawkins asserted.

"Possibly so, but I have made it a rule never to shirk little responsibilities of that kind," Blake declared.

"Then too, if a man has got a grudge against me I am always anxious for him to come and give me a chance to settle the matter."

"I fancy from what Thompson said when he departed that he was satisfied, and if he isn't I want to know it so as to have a chance to settle the quarrel."

The sport spoke in such a matter-of-fact way that the Kentuckians were surprised.

"But if this hyer fuss with Bub is carried on any further it won't be fists next time, you know," Jeff Hawkins warned.

"No, sir, it will be knives or guns, and Bub is a terror with we'pons," Bill Hawkins added.

"It does not make a particle of difference to me how he fights," Blake replied.

"But I can tell him, and this entire neighborhood one thing and that is no man can attack me in a secret, underhand way without being promptly called to an account if I can succeed in discovering who is responsible for the assault."

A look of doubt appeared on the faces of the brothers for they took this to be a piece of bravado.

"By the way, I suppose that your sister

must have been considerably alarmed by this row?" Blake remarked.

He was surprised because the girl had not made her appearance, and so spoke about her.

"She ain't in the house," Jeff Hawkins explained.

"My aunt was taken sick this evening and she sent over for Belle."

The quick-witted sport saw what the game was immediately.

The girl had been sent out of the way so that she would not know anything about the attack on him.

"Well, that is fortunate," Blake remarked.

"For she, undoubtedly, would have been greatly alarmed, but as it turned out no damage has been done, and I don't think it is likely that the fellows will come back."

"If they do, though, I will give them a warm reception."

"Oh, I reckon they won't come back," Jeff Hawkins assented, and then after a few more words the brothers withdrew, evidently very much out of sorts.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SPORT PAYS A VISIT.

BLAKE chuckled quietly to himself for a few moments after the brothers withdrew.

"They are a precious pair of rascals," he muttered.

"Thanks to the warning given me by the girl, though, I succeeded in escaping from the trap which they laid for me."

"They are anxious to get me off on a false scent, and so they threw out that suggestion that Bub Thompson had something to do with the matter."

"But I don't think there is a bit of truth in the surmise."

"So far in my career I have never made any great mistakes in sizing up men, and although this Thompson may be the bully of the district, a fellow who delights in proclaiming that he is the cock of the walk, yet I do not think there is anything of the rascal about him."

"My idea is that these brothers have taken advantage of the liking which Thompson has for their sister to play him for a flat."

"He is not the man though to try to get square with me by an attack in the dark unless I am greatly mistaken, and I do not believe that is possible."

"But now the question comes up, is there any danger of another attack to-night?"

Blake meditated over the matter for a few moments and then came to the conclusion that there was not.

"But I will take precautions just the same as though I expected the rascals would come back in full force," the sport murmured.

Again he wedged the chair in under the latch of the inner door, and arranged the table with the chairs on it against the outer one.

Then he prepared his bunk in the corner, laid down, and blew out the candle.

"If these fellows do come again to disturb my slumbers I don't think I will take pains this time to fire over their heads."

"On the contrary I shall try to damage some of them in such a way that they will be apt to regret having taken part in the expedition to their latest day."

The sport soon fell asleep, and reposed undisturbed until morning.

He awoke in good season, went out through the side door to the spring where he made his simple toilet.

Just as he finished the girl came to the spring with a pail for water.

Blake bade her good-morning, and Belle surveyed him with considerable curiosity.

"I am alive," the sport remarked with a laugh.

"But you were attacked during the night?" she queried.

"Well, not exactly; an attempt was made to attack me, but as I was on my guard, thanks to your warning, the gang did not succeed in getting at me."

The sport then related what had occurred, and did not neglect to mention the bruises which her brothers had received by running against each other in the darkness.

The girl smiled.

"I came home from my cousins' house

early this morning, so I did not see them, but the wife of one of them, who was up with a sick child when they arrived, told me she supposed they must have been in a fight for one of them had a black eye, and the other's face was scratched and bruised."

"They probably ran against each other in the darkness too," Blake observed with a laugh.

"Yes, I suppose so," and Bella laughed too.

"Have you any idea why any one should want to attack me?"

"No, unless they supposed that you were carrying considerable money, and they hoped to get it," the girl replied in a thoughtful way.

"If they had succeeded in getting at my cash they would have been very much disgusted at the amount, I think."

"I must hurry away now, for if my brothers should discover that I was holding a lengthy conversation with you they would be sure to come to the conclusion that something was wrong."

"Yes, it is best to be cautious," Blake observed.

Then the girl returned to the house, while the sport took a seat upon a rock which cropped out of the earth near by and fell to meditating upon the situation.

"There is no doubt that this is all a cut and dried attempt to get at me," the sport mused.

"The thorn was driven into the hoof of my horse on purpose to lame her so that I would be forced to seek shelter at this house."

"I don't really think that the fellows want to kill me, for there isn't any reason for their proceeding to such an extreme as that."

"The matter is just this way, I think."

"I am in a region where there are a number of men who have reason to apprehend that the strong arm of the law is reaching out for them."

"It is not a usual thing for a stranger to ride through the country, and they do not believe my story that I am on my way to the races at Lexington—that I am only a race-track sport, who is looking forward to picking up a few dollars at this meeting."

"They apprehend that I may prove to be dangerous to them, and so they seek to get at me."

"Their idea, I think, is to make me a prisoner, for if they had wanted to kill me it would have been their game to have remained in ambush until I came within range and then they could have opened fire on me."

"If the trick had been worked in that way the chances are big that the fellow might have got me, but they were anxious to get an opportunity to talk to me and as they were six to one they felt certain that I couldn't get away."

At this point the sport's meditations were interrupted by the appearance of Jeff Hawkins.

Blake rose to his feet as the other advanced, and it was as much as the sport could do to keep a straight face when he noticed how the countenance of the other was disfigured.

The bruises on Hawkins's face were much more visible now than they had been before.

"Well, how do you find yourself this morning?" Blake asked.

"I don't feel over and above well, and I have been doing a heap of thinking 'bout that 'ar affair last night," the Kentuckian observed in a sulky way.

"It was a mighty strange proceeding to say the least."

"You kin bet your bottom dollar that it was, and the more I think 'bout the blamed thing the more I git bothered about it."

"Is that so?" the sport remarked in a guileless, innocent way.

"Yes, sir, I can't make head nor tail of it, nohow."

"Oh, it is the biggest kind of a puzzle and no mistake."

"Breakfast is ready!" Belle announced from the door of the house.

"And I am ready for breakfast!" the sport declared briskly.

"I reckon that little skirmish last night has given me an appetite."

"Mebbe so, but if them ar' fellows had-

n't slipped up someway in their game I reckon you wouldn't have been in a condition to do much eating," Jeff Hawkins observed, grimly.

"I do not doubt that your surmise is correct, but there is an old saying, you know, about a miss being as good as a mile," Blake retorted. "And I think it fits in here beautifully."

"What the fellows intended to do and what they did do are two entirely different things. I got the best of the skirmish, and so I am in a good condition to enjoy my breakfast this morning, which is more, I think, than some of my visitors can say."

"Yes, mebbe so," the Kentuckian responded in an extremely gloomy way.

The two proceeded to the house, where the girl had provided a substantial breakfast, to which the sport did full justice.

There was but little said during the meal for neither of the brothers were inclined to talk, and the sport understanding that they were in a sulky mood, did not attempt to draw them into a conversation.

After the meal was ended, though, Blake said in an abrupt way:

"Is Bub Thompson's house far from here?"

"No, only a couple of miles," Jeff Hawkins replied.

"Suppose you give me the directions, so I can find it," Blake remarked.

The Hawkinses looked surprised.

"I want to have a little talk with that young man about last night's work," the sport explained.

"If he was responsible for that little affair, I want to know it."

"I hate awfully to think that there is some fellow who is watching and waiting to get a chance to strike me in the back."

"I hain't got any objections to telling you, of course, Jeff Hawkins observed."

And then he proceeded to instruct the sport in regard to the road.

"Much obliged!" Blake exclaimed. "I will go over right away, for when I have anything of this kind on my mind, I am never easy until I settle the matter."

Then off the sport started.

Bub Thompson's place was only about half an hour's walk from the Hawkins place, and Blake had no difficulty in finding his way.

There was a bend in the road just before the sport came to the farm-house, and as Blake came around the bend, he found himself within a hundred feet of Bub Thompson.

The Kentuckian stared in amazement as the sport strode up to him, but as Blake greeted him pleasantly Thompson understood that he did not come in the guise of an enemy.

Blake proceeded immediately to explain why he had come.

"B'gosh!" the Kentuckian exclaimed. "I will be durned if this ain't one of the queerest things that I ever heerd on!"

"One of the Hawkins boys let fall a remark to the effect that it was possible that some friends of yours were concerned in the matter."

"No, sir, no, sir ee!" Bub Thompson exclaimed, emphatically. "I hain't got a friend in the world what would be guilty of doing a thing of that kind, and you kin bet your life that if I had I would be the last man living to put 'em up to going into any such low-down game."

"I am quite ready to believe you, and when the Hawkinses spoke I didn't credit the supposition."

"I have been doing a heap of thinking since I had that fight with you," Bub Thompson remarked.

"Well, sometimes a little pugilistic encounter does make a man put on his thinking cap," Blake replied.

"Of course I understand that I was the biggest kind of a fool for to attempt to stand up ag'in' such a man as you are."

"Yes, but until you got into the fight you did not know that, and as I judge from what the Hawkinses said about you that you have a big reputation as a fighter in this district, it was only natural you should imagine you would not have much difficulty in getting away with me, for I do not look as if I was much of a warrior being a very deceptive man in appearance."

"Waal, I wasn't thinking about the fight so much," the Kentuckian remarked, slowly.

"I don't make any brags 'bout being unusually smart, but I kin jest tell you that arter I got that ar' furst rib-roaster from you I made up my mind that I had made a mistake in tackling you."

"Yes, a good, sound knock of that kind is apt to impart a deal of wisdom to a man once in a while."

"B'gosh! I never got such a lick in all my born days!" Thompson declared.

"It seemed to kinder knock my insides all on top of each other, and when I struck the ground, it did not seem as if I had a minute's life left in me."

"Under such circumstances then it must be said that you had considerable pluck in coming up to the scratch."

"Waal, you see it was because I ain't got as much sense as I ought to have," the Kentuckian admitted frankly.

"I couldn't git the idea into my head that I had run up ag'in' a man who could whale me like thunder without any trouble."

"It was my idee that thar must be some mistake 'bout the matter. I couldn't git it through my hair, you know, that I had taken the contract to buck ag'in' a man who could hit about as hard as a mule kin kick."

"Yes, if a man is at all inclined to be obstinate, it is hard work for him sometimes to recognize a fact of this kind."

"I kinder thought that it wasn't possible for a man to get in a second lick of that kind, but after you smashed me two or three times I kinder woke up to the idee that I had made a mistake in the calculation."

"Men will make such mistakes."

"But it wasn't the fight that I was doing a heap of thinking about."

"What was it then—perhaps though I am indiscreet in asking," the sport remarked.

"Oh, no, not a mite!" the Kentuckian responded. "It is kinder a comfort for a man to spit out what he thinks about a thing of this kind, particularly when he is talking to a stranger who won't be apt to go gabbling 'bout the thing all over the neighborhood."

"Well, as far as I am concerned you need not be alarmed about that," the sport replied.

"I am not much of a talker anyway; then, too, I am a stranger in these parts, only passing through, and as soon as my horse is well enough to travel, I will go on, and the chances are that I will never come this way again."

"This hyer fight of mine with you reminds me of a story that a fellow who had been down to Lexington brought back with him."

"It was 'bout a bull who went on the railroad track and attempted to buck a locomotive going jest lickersplit."

"Arter the bull went into the ditch with his head broke, a man who see'd the thing said, 'I admire your pluck but durn your sense!'"

The sport laughed.

"That is a good story and fits the case of some men exactly," he remarked.

"What I was a-thinking about was them Hawkinses!" the Kentuckian declared with a grave shake of the head.

"Do you know, stranger, I have kinder got the idea that them fellers have played me for a flat."

"Do you think so?"

"Sart'in! that is jest what I have been cogitating about."

"Belle Hawkins is a durned handsome girl, you know."

"Yes, she certainly is good-looking, and she seems to be a nice, lady-like girl too."

"You kin bet high on that!" Bub Thompson declared, emphatically.

"She is a good head and shoulders above any other gal in this destrict, and she has allers had a proud and haughty way with her, jest as if she thought she was a heap better than common folks."

"Well, there isn't any mistake about the girl being extremely lady-like."

"Thar' ain't hardly a feller for twenty miles around but what has tried to shine up to her, but she wouldn't never allow any of them to go with her."

"They all said she was too haughty and stuck up, and it was thought mighty wonderful that she should be so for her brothers don't amount to anything. In fact none of her family; for her cousins, the Gumridges

who live about a mile away from the Hawkinses, further up on the hill, don't bear a good name."

"Yes, I met them and was not impressed with their appearance."

"All the Hawkinses and Gumridges are bad eggs!" the Kentuckian declared.

"There is a heap of illicit distilling going on up in the mountains, and anybody who knows anything understands that these fellers work a game of that kind whenever they kin."

"But that don't amount to much, for the average man in this hyer destrict don't think that it is any great shakes of a sin to cheat the Government out of the whisky-tax."

"Yes, I understand that," the sport responded. "Cheating the Government and cheating the individual are two entirely different things."

"Sart'in; but there is a suspicion that these hyer four boys, Jeff and Bill Hawkins, and Norman and Bijah Gunridge are mixed up with a couple of fellers, Biff Scroggins and Old Man Martin, who bear the worst kind of a reputation."

"Hard cases, eh?"

"You bet!" cried Bub Thompson in a very emphatic way.

"Both of them have been accused a half a dozen times of committing robberies, and there was one case of holding up a train on the Louisville and Nashville road when the officers thought they had the pair fast, but they managed to wriggle out of the scrape some way."

"Well, if these young men associate with such rascals, it goes to show that they are not what they ought to be themselves."

"That is jest it, and that is jest what people in this hyer destrict think," Bub Thompson declared.

"But you see I was 'tarnal fool enuff to git stuck arter the gal, and when the Hawkinses saw how the cat was jumping, they jest went in fer to play me for a flat, as I told you right in the beginning."

"They took advantage of the fact that you had fallen in love with the young lady?"

"Yes, sir, that is it, for sart'in!" the Kentuckian responded with a melancholy shake of the head.

"They worked the game mighty slick, too; I must allow that for a fact," Bub Thompson added.

"They told me that the gal had taken a powerful great liking to me, but she was kinder backward, and bashful, and bated to let on to anybody that she liked me, and, stranger, I wish I may die if I wasn't donkey enuff fer to believe it."

"The wish was father to the thought, of course," the sport observed.

"You were anxious for the girl to like you and so when they said that you had made a favorable impression upon her it was very natural for you to believe it."

"And they kept on inviting me to come and see her and a-filling me full, you know, of yarns of what she said about me arter I was gone, and how pleased she was that I came to see her."

"All of which, of course, you greedily swallowed," Blake remarked with a laugh.

"You bet I swallowed them and was about tickled to death 'cos I was a getting along so well, never having an idee you know, that the Hawkinses were a-playing me for a fool!" Bub Thompson exclaimed with bitter accent.

"And I never had no suspicion that everything wasn't all right until yesterday," the Kentuckian continued.

"I had never tried to kiss the gal afore, or even to give her a gentle hug, but somehow the notion come to me that it was almost time that I had a right to sich things if she was so dead in love with me as her brothers said."

"Under the circumstances it was only natural that you should think in that way."

"But when she got so tarnal mad and flew up at me jest like a wildcat it sort of opened my eyes and I made up my mind that thar must be some mistake 'bout the thing."

"And then when she stood there, and saw you bang me jest as if I didn't cost nothing at all, and never said a word, taking it all in jest as if it was a reg'lar show, I made up my mind that I had been made a

fool of by the Hawkinses, and the girl didn't care two wags of a mule's tail for me."

"I do not think there is a doubt about that being the truth," Blake responded. "But from what I know of the affair I think it is certain that the Hawkins brothers did all in their power to make a match between you and the girl, for after you departed they blamed me for interfering in the matter, saying that they considered you were a good catch for their sister, and I had no business to come in and break the match up."

"I s'pose it war their idee to force the girl to marry me whether she wanted to or not," the Kentuckian remarked, making a grimace.

"I reckon that war their leetle game."

"Jest as if a man would want to hitch to a gal in that way, and then have the critter give leg bail with some other feller at the first chance."

"You don't want any of that, eh?"

"Not much!"

"Well, I must be going. I am glad that you don't bear any malice."

"None at all! and I would do anything I could for you!" the Kentuckian declared.

Blake replied in suitable terms and departed.

CHAPTER X.

THE YELLOW BEARDS.

THE sport went on a brisk pace and was soon out of sight of the farm, and as he proceeded along the lonely rode he communed with himself after his usual fashion.

"I did not make any mistake about this young Kentuckian," he declared.

"It was my idea from what I had seen of him that he would not be the kind of fellow to try any underhand proceeding.

"The Hawkins brothers and their cousins, the Gumridges are the men who made the attack, but why they did it is a mystery to me, unless I proceed on the old idea,

'Suspicion ever haunts the guilty mind,
The thief doth fear each bush an officer.'

"That would account for the attack. I am a stranger, and there is something about me which has caused these rascals to get the idea that I am a detective in disguise, and so they have gone for me."

"So far though they have not succeeded in doing any damage, and if I keep my wits about me I think I will be able to get out of this district alive."

"I hope the scoundrels have not injured the mare so as to prevent her from running, for I think I may reasonably hope to pick up a few dollars with her."

"If my Maysville friend is correct she is a speedy beast for a couple of miles or more, and as her appearance is so much against her—for no one but a very old and experienced horseman would believe she would be able to do anything on a track—I may be able to pick up a few good bets."

By this time the sport had entered upon a particularly wild and desolate bit of country.

He had not passed a house since leaving the farm of Bub Thompson, and as far as the eye could reach in the distance there wasn't a sign of a human habitation.

"By Jove! this is a lonely stretch," Blake remarked.

"If a fellow was to be waylaid and assaulted this would be just about the place to work the trick."

Hardly had the words left his lips when a man popped up from behind a great boulder by the side of the way and leveled a revolver at the sport.

"Throw up your hands!" cried the newcomer.

He was dressed in a rough suit of clothes, wore a slouch hat, pulled down over his eyes, and a black mask from under which came a yellow beard.

"Nary throw up!" ejaculated Blake, and as he spoke, with the agility of a professional acrobat he skipped behind a tree-trunk which stood by the roadside, within a yard of him.

"That will not do you any good!" cried a hoarse voice in his rear.

Blake turned, somewhat surprised, and beheld a second masked man, a counterpart of

the first, who had risen from the shelter of a clump of evergreens some fifty paces in his rear.

The second masked man also threatened him with a revolver.

Blake was too old a bird to despair even if he was menaced front and rear.

With another dextrous jump he sprung from behind the tree-trunk and took refuge in a clump of evergreens, a couple of yards off, which afford him partial protection from both the man in the front and the other in his rear.

"No good!" cried the unknown, who had previously spoken.

"We have got you in the tightest kind of a trap and you can't get out no matter how you twist and turn!"

"Shall I salivate him?" another hoarse voice cried.

A third masked man had risen from behind a mass of rocks about sixty feet to the right and directly behind where Blake stood.

The sport rose to his feet and stepped out into the middle of the road.

"This sort of thing makes me tired!" he declared.

"How many more is there of your fellows scattered around here anyway?" he questioned.

"Suppose that you all show yourselves at once and stop this jumping up one after the other like a lot of jacks in the box."

"All right!" ejaculated the man in the rear, who was apparently the leader of the party.

"There isn't any reason why we should not oblige the gentleman, so get up, boys, and show yourselves."

There were three masked men visible, and at the commands of the chief three more made their appearance.

All were as alike as two peas—dressed in the commonest of clothes; all with slouch hats pulled down low over their foreheads, black masks hiding their faces, and bushy yellow beards, sticking out from under their masks.

"Six of you!" the sport exclaimed. "Six elegant gentlemen, and all so much alike that it would be a hard matter to tell t'other from which."

The masked men stared at the sport, and then they all shook their heads.

The masks concealed the expression of astonishment which was on the faces of all of the six.

They were surprised to find that Blake took the matter so coolly.

The sport did not seem to be at all disturbed, although for a man to be ambushed by six masked men, armed with revolvers, on a lonely road, was enough to disturb the composure of even the bravest of mortals.

"This is quite a surprise party!" the sport continued.

"Wal, blame me! if you ain't a cool hand!" the leader of the masked men exclaimed.

"Yes, I have been told so before. I reckon on that I must have been born on an iceberg," Blake replied with a right laugh.

The masked outlaw chief was irritated both by the words and the manner of the sport.

"Say! it strikes me that you don't appear to understand what this hyer business means!" the disguised leader cried.

"Oh, yes, I understand it well enough," the sport rejoined.

"I am not at all dull of comprehension, you know. When men with masks on their faces and arms in their hands stop my way on a lonely road like this, I understand that they don't do it for the purpose of asking after my health or of passing the time of day with me."

"You mean business, of course, but I must admit that I am rather surprised to think that you consider it necessary to use so great a number of men in a little job of this kind."

"I have known a stage-coach with a half a dozen men on board, without counting the driver, to be held up by a single man, and, as a rule there are never more than two men considered necessary to work a game of that kind, and when six take hold of a job it means that the captain of the outfit considers the trick to be a mighty big one, so I suppose that I ought to feel complimented by this display of force."

"Mebbe you think that this hyer thing is

"all a joke!" the outlaw chief exclaimed, evidently annoyed by the levity which the sport manifested in regard to the matter.

"Well, no, I can't say that I do," the sport replied with a sober face.

"I reckon that you mean business all right, although if I hadn't been posted about this Yellow Beard wrinkle I might have come to the conclusion that you were all rigged out for a fancy-dress ball—a sort of a masquerade, you know." And then Blake laughed as though he considered that he had said something funny.

"You are too blamed fresh!" the outlaw chief cried in a disguised tone.

"Too fresh, eh?" and the sport laughed again.

"I suppose that must be true, for I have been told so often enough."

"We are wasting time with all this chin music!" the outlaw chief declared.

"You are doing as much talking as I am," the sharp retorted. "So you must not blame me alone."

"We want you to go with us," the masked leader said, sternly.

"What little game are you trying to play?" Blake asked, assuming to be greatly astonished.

"Don't ask questions!" the outlaw chief rejoined.

CHAPTER XI.

A BOLD DEFIANCE.

"DON'T ask questions, eh?" Blake observed, and although there was a smile on his lips, yet there came in his eyes a peculiar gleam which denoted that his temper was rising.

"No, we will do all the questioning that is necessary!" the outlaw chief replied.

"Maybe that will not suit me," the sport remarked in a quiet way, but the smile had vanished from his lips.

"I reckon that we don't keer much whether it suits you or not!" the masked leader responded in an arrogant way.

"We are running this thing we want you to understand, and you can bet your bottom dollar that we are going to run it our way too, and if you are wise, and know when you are well off, you will not try any monkey business with us."

"Oh, that is all right!" Blake declared. "You will find me to be one of the easiest men in the world to get along with if you only go to work in the right way."

"But I am mighty obstinate, you understand, and I have a strong objection to being driven."

Again the masked men stared at the sport and then at each other.

What kind of a fellow was this who talked in such a defiant way, regardless of the fact that he was "held up" by six men, and was completely at their mercy, according to their ideas.

"Wal, doggone me!" cried the outlaw chief in astonishment. "If you ain't the cheekiest cuss that I have ever run across in all my born days, I don't want a cent."

"Say! is it possible that you don't understand that you are in the tightest kind of a fix?"

"I suppose you have got a little the best of the situation," the sport replied in a careless way, speaking as though he was not particularly worried by the fact.

"A little the best of it!" the other exclaimed. "Wal, I reckon we have! We are six to one, and you are trapped as completely as though we had you in an iron cage!"

"Is that so?" and the sport put the question with the gravest of faces.

"What is the matter with you?" the outlaw chief roared in a rage.

"Are you crazy that you don't understand how you are situated?"

"Oh, no, I am in full possession of all my senses, I think," the sport replied.

"But let us get right down to business. What do you want of me—my valuables? Because if that is what you are after, I can just as well shell out here as to go off with you."

"I reckon that we will take what loose change you have about you," the outlaw chief replied.

"But you have got to go with us all the

same, for we want to have a little talk with you at our leisure."

"About what?" the sport demanded in the most abrupt manner.

The outlaw chief hesitated for a moment and then said:

"You are the freshest rooster that I ever struck! Blame it all! if you ain't trying to put me through a reg'lar cross examination, but I don't mind telling you a few things."

"I am glad of that, for there isn't a man in the world more anxious to obtain information than an individual about my size!" the irrepressible sport exclaimed.

"I don't see that there is any harm in letting you know how things are," the outlaw chief remarked in a meditative way.

"Not the slightest! so drive on with your mule team!" Blake exclaimed.

The eyes of the outlaws flashed but their masks concealed the scowl which darkened their faces, occasioned by the levity of the man whom they had "corralled" as they would have expressed it.

"You are a stranger hyer, and as there seems to be something suspicious about you we have taken it upon ourselves to find out just who and what you are," the masked leader explained.

"Oh, you are away off!" Blake exclaimed. "Where on earth did you get any such notion? What is there suspicious about me? I am a traveler, passing through this section of country on my way from Maysville, on the Ohio, to Lexington."

"I am a sport by profession and expect to pick up a few dollars during this race meeting at Lexington, and it is only owing to an accident to my horse that I am detained here."

"The beast either picked up a thorn on the road or else some malicious devil drove the thorn into her hoof on purpose to lay her up."

"It is my impression that the injury which she received came in this way, and I have a suspicion too as to who the men were who put up the job."

"This hasn't anything to do with us, and we don't take any interest in the matter," the outlaw chief declared.

"Maybe that is the truth and maybe it isn't!" Blake responded, immediately. "But if you want me to tell you just what I think about the matter I will say that it is my opinion that you men are just the ones who arranged the game!"

This bold utterance caused the masked men to stare in amazement.

What sort of a fellow was this stranger who dared to tell them to their teeth of their misdeeds?

"You are a mighty smart young man!" the outlaw leader sneered.

"And you are right about the thing, too; your horse was lamed by my orders, and the reason I had the job done was so that we would get a chance at you."

"Oh, you wanted a chance at me, eh?" and the peculiar light which had shone in Blake's eyes ever since the masked men made their appearance now grew very vivid.

"Yes, we think that you are a spy who has come up into this region on purpose to make trouble, and we intend to put you through a course of sprouts so as to find out just what you are up to, and if we discover that you are a spy, you can bet your bottom dollar that we will make you regret the day when you went in to trap the men up in this region."

"I have told you the truth in regard to myself, and I defy you to prove that I am anything but what I represent myself to be!" the sport declared.

"Oh, yes, of course you will not own up!" the Yellow Beard chief retorted. "But you just wait until we try some of our persuasive measures upon you and I am willing to bet high that you will change your mind."

"And you were the man who put up the job to lame my horse, eh?" Blake asked, his tone quiet, but with the vivid light fairly blazing from his eyes.

"Oh, yes, and I reckon the job was done up in prime style, too, ha, ha!" and the outlaw chief laughed.

This struck the rest of the gang as being a good joke, and they all laughed heartily.

The sport had put his hands in the side pockets of his loose sack-coat during the conversation.

This movement he performed so carelessly

that none of the outlaws suspected that there was anything suspicious about the operation, and none of them gave it a thought.

"It was a mighty fine game, and you have ruined my horse, maybe," the sport observed.

"Maybe you will not need a horse after we get through with you!" the chief of the Yellow Beards retorted.

"Oh, I reckon I will!" Blake replied, and as he finished the sentence out came his hands from his pockets.

In each hand was a revolver and almost before the outlaws were conscious of what he was up to the sport opened fire upon them.

The first shot was directed at the chief.

And almost before the report of the pistol vibrated on the air the outlaw leader threw up his hands, staggered forward and went down on his face.

The second shot hit the masked outlaw on Blake's right hand and down he went all in a heap.

Neither one of the two stricken men had a chance to fire a return shot so quickly did the sport fire.

But after the second shot the four outlaws blazed away at the bold stranger who had not hesitated to, single-handed, fight six desperadoes.

The outlaws were rattled though by the downfall of their chief and his lieutenant, for as it happened it was the Yellow Beard chief's right hand man who received Blake's second bullet, and so it happened that their aim was disordered, causing the bullets to fly wide of the mark.

Then again the sport's revolvers spoke, for he wheeled with wonderful quickness and blazed away at the other outlaws.

The first shot dropped the man at whom it was aimed, but before Blake could turn and fire at the next man in order the outlaws took to their heels and raced away at headlong speed.

They were completely panic-stricken.

And it was little wonder.

Six men against one and with the advantage of a complete surprise too, yet the sport had stretched three of them on the ground without receiving a scratch.

It was not strange that the rest fled as though Satan himself was at their heels.

CHAPTER XII.

A DISCOVERY.

THE sport was out for blood for he felt certain that the gang would not have shown him any mercy.

So he leveled his revolvers at the fleeing men and took deliberate aim.

Crack, crack!

Sharply rung the reports out on the still, clear mountain air.

One of the outlaws gave a yell of pain, thus betraying that he was hit.

The man did not stop though but raced onward as though the wound spurred him to fresh exertions.

None of the rest betrayed any signs that the bullets had taken effect upon them, so the conclusion was plain that the second bullet had missed its mark.

"It is rather too far to make sure of my aim!" Blake exclaimed.

In order to frighten the scoundrels though he sent a couple more shots after them.

The bullets whistled harmlessly through the air, and before the sport could fire again the outlaws disappeared amid the rocks and trees.

A derisive laugh came from the sport.

"These Yellow Beards are a lot of curs!" he exclaimed.

"The idea of three of them running from one man!"

"Bah! it is nonsense to call such fellows desperadoes. They are more hares than wolves, brave enough when they have everything their own way but ready enough to run when they meet with a man who has pluck enough to fight."

Just as he came to the end of the sentence the sound of horse's hoofs fell upon his ears.

He listened for a moment.

The sound grew more and more distinct.

The sport judged that there was more than

one horseman approaching, and they were coming at a good pace.

"This is fortunate!" Blake exclaimed. "For this is one of the cases where it is best to have witnesses."

"I am a stranger in this district and if there was only one man concerned in this affair, when the friends of the man discovered that I had got the best of the fight they might take it into their heads to accuse me of having taken some unfair advantage, and try to make out that I had assassinated the man."

"Under these circumstances though it would be a wide stretch of the imagination for any one to declare that I had ambushed and killed three men without giving them a chance for their lives."

"Then, too, the masks upon their faces and their false beards would go to show that they were the aggressors and not I, for men proceeding along a public road going about their ordinary business do not cover their faces with masks or wear false beards."

The sound of the hoof-strokes grew stronger and stronger, and as the sport listened he guessed that the horsemen were just around the bend of the road about a hundred yards off.

Blake took a seat upon a rock by the roadside, and waited for the approach of the horsemen.

In a couple of minutes three men rode at a brisk gallop around the turn.

One was an old white-bearded man who looked like a prosperous farmer, a young fellow who bore such a decided resemblance to the white-bearded man as to suggest that he was his son, and a muscular, middle-aged man with a full brown beard and a resolute, determined-looking face.

From the expression upon the faces of the three Blake came to the conclusion that they had heard the reports of the pistols and had hurried to the spot anxious to discover the cause of the firing.

The horsemen came on until they were within fifty feet of the sport, and then they pulled up their horses and gazed around them in astonishment.

"Sakes alive! What sort of doings have been going on hyer?" the old gentleman cried.

"A sort of a shooting-match," the sport responded, with a smile.

He had retained his seat upon the rock and still held his revolvers in his hands.

"Three men laid out!" the brown bearded man exclaimed, then he looked at the sport in an inquiring way.

"Yes, I am the man who did it," Blake remarked, anticipating what the other meant by the look.

"Ali alone?" the brown-bearded man asked, after a look around, apparently for the purpose of seeing if there wasn't somebody else in the neighborhood.

"Yes, alone."

And you, single-handed, laid out these three men?" the brown-bearded man inquired in wonder.

"Yes, alone I did the trick!" the sport responded, speaking as though he did not consider that there was anything strange about the matter.

"B'gosh! this beats anything that I ever saw or heern tell on in my time!" the old fellow declared.

"Three men killed by you single-handed?" the brown-bearded man repeated, apparently struck by the performance that he could not get over his wonder.

"Yes, I managed to hold the winning cards in this deal," the sport replied.

"I think there was a good chance that I would have laid out six of them but the other three apparently got the idea that things were getting rather warm when I dropped the first three in quick succession and so they took to their heels and got away before I could get a chance at them."

"You don't mean to say that there was six on 'em!" the old fellow cried.

"Yes, sir, there were six, and the other three were got up after the same fashion as these fellows with masks and yellow beards," the sport explained.

"Well, I knew that people had an idea that the Yellow Beards had a headquarters up somewhere in this neighborhood, but I was always a leetle doubtful about it," the old man remarked.

"Wasn't you, too, kinder doubtful, sheriff?" he added.

The brown-bearded man nodded assent.

"Sheriff, eh?" Blake exclaimed. "Well, I reckon you are just the man I want to see, for, of course, it will be necessary to have some legal inquiry into the death of these men as there wasn't any witnesses to the fight."

"Yes, there will have to be an examination, and I regard it as a fortunate circumstance, that the sheriff and I happened to be the first to know about the matter, hey, sheriff?" the old fellow observed.

"Yes, for we will be able to get right at the facts of the case without any trouble," the brown-bearded man remarked.

"This gentleman is the county judge, Mr. Mortimer Langworthy, while I am the sheriff and my name is Hezekiah Buttonwood."

"I am glad to have the pleasure of making your acquaintance," Burke remarked, pocketing his revolvers, rising, and making a polite bow.

"And now you must allow me to introduce myself. My name is Jackson Blake, and I am a sport by profession."

"It is just by accident that I am in this part of the country."

Then he explained about getting the horse in Maysville and how he had made up his mind to ride through to Lexington; related, too, the episode of his horse going lame and his taking up his quarters in the Hawkins farm-house, and how he had been attacked there in the night.

"Oh! you are the stranger who whaled Bub Thompson in such a scientific manner?" the sheriff exclaimed.

"I am the man."

"I cheered about that fight," the old county judge observed, surveying the sport with renewed interest.

"But I kinder thought when I cheered the story that the boys were trying to make too big a yarn out of it, for I didn't believe that a natural born fighter like Bub could be licked clean out of his boots by a stranger without any trouble."

"I am not in the habit of boasting about my abilities as a warrior, but I will say that I did not have much trouble in getting away with Mr. Thompson," the sport replied.

"B'gosh! after seeing these three men laid out I am about ready to believe that you can do almost anything in the fighting line!" the county judge declared.

"I can understand how it was that you came to have trouble with Thompson, but why did these men attack you?" the sheriff asked.

"Well, I think I can explain that matter without any trouble," Blake replied.

"Of course I was surprised at being attacked, for I did not imagine that I presented the appearance of being sufficiently wealthy to warrant anybody going to the trouble of attempting to rob me, but from the brief conversation I had with the masked men before the fight commenced, I gathered that they believed I was a spy, and my business up in this region was to hunt them down."

"Ah, yes, I see," the sheriff remarked, thoughtfully. "That is not the truth, I suppose?" he asked, but there was an expression upon his face which showed that he had a suspicion it was.

"No, it is not so. I know nothing whatever about these outlaws, and, in fact, was not even aware of their existence until one of the Hawkins brothers told me about them," Blake replied.

"Waal, stranger, of course you know your own business better than any one else," the old judge observed. "But if you were to ask my opinion I should advise you to go into the man-hunting line as soon as possible, for I reckon you could make a big success at it."

Blake laughed and bowed to the old gentleman.

"Much obliged to you for the compliment, judge, and I am pleased to learn that you have so good an opinion of me, but I don't think I care to go into anything of that sort."

"As a sport I manage to make a tolerably good living, and I think that probably I will stick to that kind of an occupation as long as I live."

"But a man to be successful as a sport

must be able to look out for himself, for a man is always liable to be attacked, and if he cannot hold his own he would be in a bad way, so it happened that when these Yellow Beards jumped on me they found me ready for a skirmish."

"Yes, I should say so!" the judge exclaimed in a tone of profound conviction.

"It strikes me that it is a very lucky thing that you two official gentlemen happened to be the first to come along, for I presume there will have to be an inquiry into the death of these men, and I suppose I will have to be arrested until it is proven that I acted in self-defense."

"Oh, yes, there will have to be an investigation," the judge assented. "And you will have to be tried, but from the circumstances of the case the trial will be only a mere form, for the masks and false beards upon these men is ample proof that they were the men who did the attacking, and waylaid you for an unlawful purpose."

"Oh, yes, no doubt about that!" the sheriff assented. "But suppose we make an examination and see who they are?"

"A very good idea!" the judge declared. "And now we will be able to find out who these Yellow Beards really are."

"Well, although I am a stranger in this district, I don't believe that it would trouble me much to name some of the members of the gang," Blake remarked, much to the astonishment of the others.

"Do you think so?" the judge asked.

"Yes, I do, but I am not sure, of course, that the men whom I laid out are the ones whom I suspect, although I think it is likely that we will find one or two of the men whom I suspect," the sport answered.

Blake spoke with the voice of a prophet, for as they approached the third man who had fallen by the sport's well aimed bullet he rose to a sitting posture, removed his mask and false beard, revealing the face of Jefferson Hawkins.

Both the judge and the sheriff stared in great surprise, while the sport indulged in a quiet smile.

"Why, Jeff Hawkins, can it be possible that it is you?" the old judge exclaimed.

"You kin bet your life it is!" Hawkins replied, scowling angrily at the party.

"And, sheriff, I want you to arrest that stranger right away! He has put a bullet in my chest somewhar, and I reckon I will die of the thing!"

CHAPTER XIII.

IN DURANCE VILE.

BLAKE laughed outright while the rest stared in surprise at the angry speaker.

"Well, if this isn't the cheekiest thing that I ever heard you can take my head for a foot-ball!" Blake exclaimed.

"You miserable rascal—you villainous scoundrel!" the sport continued.

"Here you, with five other cut-throats, lay in wait for me on the public highway, then, with drawn revolvers, you attempt to make me a prisoner, and now after I have beaten your game, stretched you on your back, and put your companions to flight, you demand that I be arrested on a charge of assaulting you!

"I have heard of some bits of cool impudence in my time but may I be hanged if this don't go ahead of anything that ever came to my knowledge."

"It was all a joke!" Hawkins declared, endeavoring to assume an air of injured innocence.

"We didn't mean to hurt you at all, but a party of us thought that it would be a big lark to give you a scare, seeing as how you were a stranger in this destrict."

"That is just about the thinnest yarn that I ever heard!" the sport declared.

"Why, judge, we had a regular battle here. You must have heard the shots?"

The three nodded assent.

"Oh, yes, we heered 'em!" the judge remarked. "And I said to the sheriff hyer, let us push on, Hezekiah, as fast as we kin for it sounds as if there was a regular war going on."

"You will find that one barrel of his revolver is discharged," the sport explained.

"He went down at my third shot and so got a chance to fire once at me."

"I worked the game so as to take the fellows by surprise."

"The notion never entered their heads that I would show fight and so I was able to steal a march on them."

"I rather pride myself on my quickness on the draw, and on this occasion I got my weapons out so speedily that I was able to drop two of the rascals before they could get a chance to pull a trigger on me."

"Of course I fired at you!" Jeff Hawkins exclaimed.

"Do you suppose a man is going to stand still and do nothing when he sees his friends being shot down like a lot of dogs?"

"You and your friends should not expose yourselves to the chance of such a fate happening to you," the sport retorted.

"I am afraid, Hawkins, that you are in a bad box," the sheriff remarked.

"Your story is very thin and I don't believe that you will be able to find many who will believe it."

"It is the truth! Doggone me if it ain't!" the wounded man protested sullenly.

"Are you badly hurt, Hawkins?" the judge asked.

"I reckon I am. I got a bullet in my chest hyer somewhar'," Jeff Hawkins replied. "I thought I was killed when I was hit for I fainted dead away, but I don't feel quite so bad now."

"I reckon that he is worth a dozen dead men," the sport remarked.

"I am a tolerably good marksman, but under the circumstances all I could get at him was a snap-shot, and as he happened to move as I fired I didn't lay him out for good as I intended," Blake explained.

"I don't make any bones about this matter, you know, judge," he added.

"I regarded it as a battle to the death. I either had to kill them or they would kill me and so I shot to kill every time."

"Quite right, sir!" the old judge declared.

"Under the circumstances you would have been very unwise to have acted in any other way."

"When the odds are six to one, or even two to one, a man ought not to throw a shot away, and he is extremely foolish if he does not do his best to fix his opponents so that they will not be able to trouble him again."

While this conversation had been going on the sheriff had removed the disguises from the other men.

Both were dead.

In this case the bullets of the sport had gone straight to the mark.

An exclamation of surprise came from the lips of the sheriff as he gazed upon the features of the dead men.

"Do you know them, sheriff?" the judge called out.

"Oh, yes, and so does everybody else who knows anything about the criminal business of this county!" the official replied.

"Who are they?" the old gentleman asked.

"Black Dan MacNabb and Lige Brockston," said the sheriff.

"Are they killed, sheriff?" Jeff Hawkins cried.

"As dead as a door nail!" Buttonwood replied.

"And you may thank your lucky stars that you are not in the same box," the sport remarked to Jeff Hawkins.

That worthy shivered.

He was not exactly a coward, yet far from being the man to face death undauntedly.

"Mr. Blake, you have really done this community a service in ridding it of these two men," the judge declared.

"Were they bad eggs?" the sport queried.

"Yes, the two worst men in the county beyond a doubt," the official declared.

"It was a good thing then that I wiped them out," Blake remarked.

"No doubt about that; both of the men richly deserved their fate."

"The law has been reaching for the pair for a long time, but they have always been smart enough to escape the punishment which they have so richly deserved," Judge Langworthy explained.

"They have been concerned in a dozen brawls, and in some of them there has been a loss of life, but as the fellows always laid plenty of witnesses who were ready to swear

that they acted strictly in self-defense they managed to escape a conviction."

"Then, too, they have been suspected of having committed a number of robberies in this neighborhood," said the sheriff, who had rejoined the party.

"But no one was ever lucky enough to catch them in the act, I suppose," the sport conjectured.

"Yes, that was the way of it," the sheriff replied.

"Almost everybody felt morally certain that Black Dan and Lige Brockston had a hand in the crimes, for they usually possessed plenty of money and yet were never known to do any work to amount to anything."

"That is strong evidence and yet it doesn't amount to anything in a court of law," the sport remarked.

"You are correct in regard to that," the judge observed.

"And then there was another circumstance which helped these men to escape justice," the sheriff asserted.

"Both of them were known to be desperate fellows who would just about as soon fight as eat, and everybody understood that any man who gave evidence against either of the pair would have a mortal quarrel on his hands, so that it was only natural that men should be reluctant to give testimony against them."

"Yes, there is a good deal in that," the sport agreed.

"And it is likely too that you will have some trouble about this matter," the sheriff warned.

"Ah, yes, I should not be surprised, for man is as prone to trouble in this uncertain world as the sparks to fly upward," the sport rejoined.

"Both of these men have a number of friends, and some of the fellows are hard cases," the official explained.

"And you think it is likely that some of these friends will try to avenge the death of these scoundrels?" Blake asked.

"Yes, I don't think there is a doubt about the matter."

"Well, I am in for it and will have to face the music, of course," the sport remarked with an air of resignation, but to the surprise of the others he did not seem to be at all worried about the matter.

"I am not particularly bloodthirsty," Blake declared. "And I am not traveling around the world like a hungry lion seeking whom I may devour, but if circumstances arise so that it appears to me to be necessary to go into a quarrel, then I do my best to make things lively for my opponents, and I think I may say, without being suspected of boasting, that as a rule I succeed in holding my own."

Jeff Hawkins gave utterance to an ejaculation which sounded a great deal like a "cuss"-word at this point, while the others looked at the dead men and nodded their heads as much as to say that they agreed with the sport.

"I s'pose I will have to arrest you," the sheriff remarked after a brief pause.

"The death of these men lies at your door and there will have to be a trial so as to show that you were justified in killing them before you can be released."

"That is the regular method of proceeding," the judge added.

"I have no objections to offer," Blake replied. "I am always ready to submit to the law."

"It will not be anything but a mere form in this case," the judge asserted.

"For the fact that the men had on masks and false beards shows conclusively that they were engaged in an unlawful purpose."

"It was all a joke!" Jeff Hawkins declared in a doleful voice. "We were only trying for to give this hyer stranger a scare."

"Ah, don't make a donkey of yourself, Hawkins!" the sheriff exclaimed.

"You know well enough that you wasn't trying to do anything of the kind."

"I wish I may die if we wasn't!" the wounded man persisted in a sulky way.

"You can tell that yarn to the jury, but I will bet you a hundred to one that you will not be able to convince them that it is the truth," the sheriff declared.

This ended the conversation between the two.

The sheriff departed with the sport, it being arranged that the judge and his son should remain with Hawkins until a wagon could be had to transport the Yellow Beards to the village.

It was only a couple of miles to the county seat where the jail was located, and there Blake was given into the care of the jailer.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN THE JAIL.

The jailor was a middle-aged, red-bearded Irishman who answered to the name of Barney O'Toole, a fellow with a thin, hatchet-like face which wore a sneaky expression.

Great was his astonishment when he learned what had taken place.

"Upon me wourd it bangs Bannagher!" he declared. "An' ye, single-handed, fought six men and laid out Black Dan MacNabb and Lige Brockston, the two best fighters in the county."

"It is a sure enough fact," the sheriff replied. "This stranger was too much for them."

"I niver would have bel'aved that such a thing could have been afther happenin'" the Irishman declared.

"It has happened all right," Buttonwood answered.

"And although there is no doubt that this gentleman was fully justified in killing the men, for it was done in self-defense, yet he will have to stand a trial."

"Oh, yes, of coarse," the jailer assented.

"It will not amount to anything, for he has really done the county a service in laying out the two men, and by rights a purse ought to be raised for him."

"That would come in very handy just now, for I haven't got any more money than I know what to do with," Blake remarked.

"I reckon that you needn't build much on that," the sheriff replied. "What men ought to do and what they do perform are two entirely different things."

"Yes, that is so; you never said a truer word in your lifel" Blake declared.

"Make this gentleman as comfortable as you can," Buttonwood said to the jailer, "for his confinement here is only a mere form you know."

"Oh, yis, I will take the best of care of himl" the Irishman declared.

I will have to ask you to give up your weapons," Buttonwood observed. "But you can keep the rest of your personal property."

"Thank you," responded the sport as he handed over his revolvers.

"Don't carry a knife?" asked the sheriff.

"A small penknife only," Blake responded.

"I don't want that, of course."

And then the official departed.

The jail was a small, one-storied building, built of brick, and only contained two rooms.

The outer one was the jailer's apartment, and from this an iron door, with a grating in the upper part, led into the inner room which was the cell where prisoners were put.

Blake had given up his revolvers without a word of remonstrance, had frankly answered the official's inquiry in regard to a knife, but did not consider it was necessary to inform the sheriff that he had a small .32 caliber revolver concealed in a secret pocket in the breast of his shirt.

This was the trusty weapon which he kept in reserve for all such emergencies as this.

He did not like the looks of the jailer, and after he was locked in his cell he sat down on the side of the iron bedstead—this with a stool comprised the furniture in the apartment—and fell to meditating upon the situation.

"I tbink this Irishman is a rascal," he now mused, "and it will be wise for me to keep an eye upon him."

The jail was not a lonely place, particularly when there were any prisoners, for the jailer had a host of acquaintances and there were few minutes in the day when there weren't two or three visitors chatting with the Irishman, and taking sly peeps through the barred window.

Although the sport had not sojourned long in the neighborhood of this little town, yet already he had become a man of note.

The Hawkinses had not failed to relate how easily the stranger had thrashed Bub Thompson, who hitherto had been the champion of the district.

And now when the news spread abroad that Bub Thompson's conqueror was as handy with his weapon as with his fists, and had whipped six men, wounding one and killing two, there was a wide spread desire to look upon the man who was able to accomplish such feats.

The majority of the people who came were not satisfied to merely look upon the man who had shown himself to be so great a warrior, but wanted to talk to him.

Blake had no objection to obliging them, for the visitors made the time pass swiftly away.

Late in the afternoon the sheriff came in and explained the situation.

Jeff Hawkins had been conveyed to the hotel where a doctor had examined his wound.

The physician reported that although Hawkins was badly wounded, yet there was hardly a doubt but what he would get well.

As for the two dead men, enough evidence was found in the shape of letters in their pockets and stolen goods secreted in the lonely farm house where the pair had lived, to convict a regiment.

"Did you catch anything, sheriff, to show that either one of the two had anything to do with the robbing of the railway trains?" the sport asked.

"I am interested in this thing, for I understand there was a good, big reward offered for the men who did the job, alive or dead."

"No, nothing that would be of any account as evidence," the official replied.

"There isn't a doubt in my mind that the two had a hand in the job, but I don't believe you could prove it," Buttonwood answered.

"And the main thing, too, that the railroad and Express fellows was after was to recover some of the stolen money.

"The alive or dead business was intended for a big bluff more than anything else."

"I am sorry, for I had hopes that I would be able to pull in a thousand or two," the sport remarked.

"How soon will my trial come off, by the way?"

"On the day after to-morrow."

"That is good! They are not going to keep me long in suspense, I see."

"No, Judge Langworthy has a high respect for you, and so he has hurried the trial forward as much as possible.

"He told me to-day that it was a shame that such a man as yourself should be obliged to remain in the jail for a single hour."

"I am very much indebted to the judge, but he need not worry about me, for I am getting along all right," the sport declared.

"I am very comfortable here and can stand a few days' confinement without any trouble."

"Stranger, I am glad to hear it!" the official exclaimed in a tone which plainly showed that he meant what he said.

"You are the clear white article, and no mistake, and I tell you I would be mighty sorry if you wasn't going to pull out of this hyer scrape."

"It would be a mighty tough old jury who would convict a man of murder in a case like this where a fellow was acting solely in self-defense."

"Yes, sir, you can bet high on that!" the official declared.

"Oh, you will get off, no doubt! And, really, when you come down to the rights of the thing if the jury don't not only acquit you but fail to give you a vote of thanks for ridding the neighborhood of two of the biggest scoundrels that the State of Kentucky ever harbored, I shall be much astonished."

"I will be satisfied with the acquittal and can afford to let the vote of thanks go."

"But you are entitled to it—you bet your life you are!" the sheriff protested.

"Ah, yes, but few men in this world are lucky enough to get all that they are entitled to, you know," Blake replied, with a laugh.

"Sart'in! that is gospel truth, durn me if it ain't."

"Wal, I must be going," and the official moved toward the door.

"Keep a stiff upper lip! You are all right and don't you forget it!"

"I am not the kind of man to worry much," the sport replied.

"I believe you!—blame me if I don't!" the sheriff cried.

"I have seen some cool hands, but I will be durned if you don't take the cake—yes, sir, not only the cake but the whole blamed bakery!"

And then the sheriff departed.

The sport laughed, then reclined on the bed prepared to take matters as easily as possible.

In about ten minutes the Irish jailer poked his head in at the door.

He winked in a mysterious manner at the sport then came into the cell and said in a cautious whisper:

"There's a person beant who would like to be afther seeing yez."

"All right! I am agreeable," the sport responded, rising to a sitting posture.

"It is a lady."

"A lady, eh?"

"Yis, Miss Belle Hawkins."

"I had an idea that it must be her, for she is the only lady whose acquaintance I have made since I have been in this neighborhood."

"She was afther giving me a sly tip in regard to what she wanted."

"Yes."

"And I told her that I wouldn't mind sp'aking a few words to yez about the matter."

"That was kind of you."

"Ye see I have a high opinion of the lady; it is a foine gurl she is!"

"Oh, yes, she is very agreeable indeed. I was forced by the lameness of my horse to take up my quarters at the Hawkins place, and Miss Belle has done all in her power to make me comfortable."

"She is an illigant girl! I have always had a high respect for her!" the Irishman declared.

"And so whin she came and ax me as a favor that I would do all I could for her it's glad I was to be able to oblige her."

The Irishman did not think that it was necessary to mention that the principal reason why he was willing to aid Miss Belle was because she had slipped a five dollar bill into his hand.

"Ah, yes, of course," Blake assented.

"She is coming to see you about her brother."

"The noble Jefferson, eh?"

"Yis, sor. It is a bad box that he is in just now you know."

"Yes, his situation is not a particularly agreeable one I should say."

"He is badly wounded, and if you choose to prosecute him maybe it is to jail he will be going."

"There is certainly a good chance for it," Blake assented.

"Now, thin, it will do you no harm to go light on him, ye know," the Irishman said, persuasively.

"That is very true. Well, send the lady in and I will talk to her."

"Don't be afther forgetting to tell her that I spoke a good word for her brother."

"All right! I will remember."

Then the Irishman retreated and soon ushered Belle Hawkins into the cell.

He also brought a chair so that she might be comfortable during the interview.

"There now yez car fire away and I will be careful not to allow anybody to disturb yez," the jailer remarked, and then retreated into the outer apartment.

Belle thanked the Irishman with a smile and sat down, but as soon as the door closed behind the jailer she rose cautiously to her feet and peered through the grated window.

The sport guessed at once that she was afraid that the Irishman might take it into his head to play the spy upon the interview.

But she wronged the Irishman.

He had accepted as the truth her statement that she came to see the sport on behalf of her brother, and so had no curiosity in regard to the interview.

After satisfying herself that the jailer had no idea of playing the eavesdropper, the girl came at once to the object of her visit.

"I did not come to you about my brother," she declared. "He has never acted

like a brother to me, and now that he has got into difficulties, I would not lift a finger to save him from the punishment which he so richly deserves.

"But you befriended me, and as I am grateful, I wish to repay the service."

"Last night the Gumridge boys came to our house and had a long talk with my brother William."

"I was in the upper room, and as the walls are thin, I caught a few words of the conversation."

"They mean to attack you here in the jail, and they expect to secure the aid of the Irishman."

"I haven't much opinion of him."

"I was not able to overhear just what they intend to do, but I thought that if I came and gave warning, you might be able to defend yourself."

"Oh, yes, I can, and I thank you heartily."

Then after a few more words, Belle bid the sport good-by.

CHAPTER XV.

THE JAILER'S OFFER.

AFTER the departure of the girl, Blake reflected upon the warning which he had received.

"It is the most natural thing in the world for these fellows, whose pards I have killed, to want to get square with me," he soliloquized.

"The will is there all right, but how can they get at me?"

"That is a problem which they will have to solve, and I must put on my thinking-cap and have a try at it, too, for I may not be able to upset their little game if they are smart enough to take me unawares."

"The sheriff and the judge are all right. Both of them consider that I have done the community a service in killing the two scalawags, and, no doubt, they represent the sentiments of the public at large, so there is hardly a doubt but what I will get off all right when my trial takes place."

"After I am released the fellows can get at me; but when it comes to a free fight in the open air that is a game which two can play at, and from the taste of my quality which these men have already received I do not believe that they will be eager to try me on again, unless they can arrange matters so that I will not have any chance at all for my life."

"Can they work the trick in that way?"

The sport meditated for a few moments over the question and then shook his head.

"I fancy that it will be an extremely difficult matter!" he declared.

"Can they get at me here in the jail?"

Then the sport shook his head and the dark lines of thought wrinkled his brow.

"It depends altogether upon the jailer and I must admit that I don't like the looks of the fellow."

"He may be all right—honest and as square as they make them, and then again he may be a rascal, and I am rather inclined to the belief that he is."

"If that supposition is correct, it would be possible for these scoundrels to put up a job to attack me here in the jail."

"I am supposed to be unarmed, as the jailer took charge of my weapons, and so it would be perfectly natural for the scoundrels to suppose that I would not be able to offer any resistance."

Then the sport laughed quietly to himself for a while, as he reflected how he could astonish any men who were rash enough to attack him under the impression that bare hands would be all he could offer against deadly weapons.

"My little pop-gun is good for six shots and each shot means a life unless I have forgotten how to shoot, and I don't believe there is much danger of that."

"The jailer is the fellow whom I must keep my eyes upon!" the sport declared in conclusion.

The Irishman had been decidedly glum since he had made the discovery of what an excellent poker player the sport was, and had refrained from conversing with the prisoner.

There had been a constant string of people anxious to get a look at the sport who had roved himself to be so great a warrior.

Blake did not mind being stared at and when any of the people spoke to him replied pleasantly enough, but after dinner, when the jail for a time was vacant of visitors, he made the suggestion to O'Toole that it would be a good idea to charge so much a head for the privilege of gazing at him.

This was a joke, of course but the Irishman, being a rather dull fellow, took it in sober earnest, and was rather inclined to think that a little money could be made in that way.

But when he suggested to the next batch of visitors that they ought to "put up," the indignation which they manifested soon convinced him that the scheme could not be worked.

After supper the sport noticed that there was a change in the manner of the jailer.

From being gruff and surly O'Toole became jolly and agreeable.

As soon as he noticed the change in the jailer's manner Blake was at once on his guard.

During the previous evening he had been willing to admit visitors but now he declined to do so, giving as a reason that the prisoner was asleep and he didn't think it was right to disturb him.

Then about nine o'clock, after the visitors had ceased to come, O'Toole came to the grated window and looked into the cell.

Blake was lying upon his bunk, but in such a position that he could see and be seen, and the big coal-oil lamp, which swung from the ceiling of the outer room, cast enough light into the inner one to illuminate the apartment.

"How are you after finding yourself?" the jailer asked.

"Oh, I am all right, I reckon."

"Will ye give me yer wourd not to try to escape if I open the door and lave ye out for awhile?"

"Certainly! I am not at all anxious to escape. Why should I be?" Blake asked, rising to a sitting posture.

"Oh, I dunno, but it seems to me that you are after being in a bad hole here, do ye mind," the Irishman replied, unlocking the door as he spoke.

"I don't agree with you," the sport declared as he entered the outer room and took a chair by the table, upon the opposite side of which O'Toole had seated himself.

"Ye have been after killing two men, ye know."

"Yes but the killing was done strictly in self-defense, and then the men too were highway robbers, and when such fellows go out on the road to stop travelers if they are shot it is usually considered that the man who does the shooting has rendered an excellent service to the community at large," Blake argued.

"Oh, yis, but the friends of the dead men won't be apt to look at the matter in that light, do ye mind?"

"Oh, yes, I am aware of that fact. The pards of the dead men will have it in for me, of course."

"Of course!" O'Toole repeated. "And that is the reason why I was after saying that ye were in a very bad box."

"Oh, no, not at all! I don't doubt that the members of the gang who ran away and their friends would do all in their power to injure me, but I don't believe they will be able to get the chance."

"I dunno about that—I am not so shure!" the Irishman declared with a dubious shake of the head.

"Ye see them two men were very popular and they had lashings of friends, and it is only natural for them to want to get a whack at yeess."

"That is true enough, but how are they going to do it?" the sport added, anxious to lead the Irishman on, for he had an idea that the man had a motive for attempting to convince him that his position was a desperate one.

"Now thin will ye be after giving me your wourd to kape it a secret if I tell ye something?" O'Toole asked in an extremely mysterious way.

"Oh, yes, that will be all right!" Blake responded. "You can depend upon it that I will not give you away no matter what you may tell me."

"This weeny bit of information is after

coming from a big fri'nd of yours, do ye mind?"

The sport nodded his head and assumed a wise look.

"I am not going to be after mintioning any names, you know," the Irishman declared, with an extremely mysterious air.

"I understand."

"It is not me intition to get mixed up wid the affair any more than I can help, but the party that I mintioned has perswaded me to do what I can for you."

"Ah, yes, I see, and I am very much obliged to you," Blake responded, and he smiled at the Irishman as though he believed every word the man said.

"The fri'nds of the two dead men are after putting up a job on yeess!" the jailer whispered in the most mysterious manner.

"Is that so?" the sport inquired in the most innocent manner possible.

"Yis, sorl ye can bet your bottom dollar on it!"

"Well, I'm glad to know it," Blake remarked in a reflective way. "But are you posted in regard to the particular kind of a game which they are going to try?"

"Yes, I am!"

"That is lucky!"

"Of coarse, you understand that I myself know nothing about the matter, at ali, at all. All that I know comes from this fri'nd of yours who thinks that ye are in a bad hole and is anxious to get ye out."

"Yes, I understand."

"It is a mighty sharp game that they are going to play, but if ye are warned beforehand ye ought to be able to beat them."

"Oh, yes, I ought to be able to do it!"

"The fri'nds of the dead min are going to pack the jury so as to be able to convict ye, no matter what the evidence may be."

"Ab, yes, I comprehend."

"So ye see ye won't be after standing any chance for your life at all."

"It certainly does appear to look that way, doesn't it?" Blake observed, pretending to be very much impressed by the information.

"On, yis, the spalpeens don't intend to give ye a chance for your life."

"They will have me in a tight place!" the sport declared.

"Yis, that was what I was after telling you in the beginning."

"Well, what does this friend of mine think about the matter?"

"The party wants to save yeess and so has been after arrangln a plan."

"If yeess go to trial ye don't stand a ghost of a chance for yer life, so this fri'nd of yours was after thinking that the best thing ye could do was to cut and run."

"Cut and run?" ejaculated Blake, pretending to be greatly surprised.

"Yis, that is what I said. Thin ye can't be brought to trial, ye understand, and as both the judge and the sheriff think that ye did quite right in killing the spalpeens, the odds are big that they will not be after bothering themselves to set anybody to chase ye."

"Yes, I think that is very likely," the sport remarked in a reflective way, as though he was debating the subject in his mind.

"If this intelligence is correct, in regard to there being a plot on foot to pack the jury—"

"Oh, yis, there isn't the l'aste taste of a doubt about it!" O'Toole declared.

"Then it is possible that I am in danger, but I don't understand how I can give leg bail?"

"Yer fri'nd has been after fixing the matter with me!" the Irishman responded with a knowing wink.

"It is a high regard that I am after having for the party, ye know, and then too, as I am satisfied that ye did just right in killing the blaggards, I am willing to do what I can to help ye if I can fix the thing so that I am not being after getting into a hole myself."

"That is natural, of course," the sport remarked. "But will it not be a difficult matter for you to arrange the affair?"

"Oh, no; I am the b'ye who can be after fixing the job to the queen's taste!" the Irishman declared.

"How can you do it?"

The jailer wicked in a knowing way.

"I wasn't born yesterday, do ye mind?" he declared.

"You mean that you are up to snuff."

"Yez can be afther betting your swate life on t'nat!"

"Yes, no one would take you for a fool."

"And if they did it is a mighty big mistake they would be afther making."

"Now, thin, I am not going to consale from yez that there is some money in this job for me."

"I expected that, for it is not reasonable to suppose that you would trouble yourself about the matter if you did not stand a chance to make a stake," the sport observed.

"Indade I would not! I would be a fool if I did, for it is money which makes the mare go."

"Ob, yes, no doubt about that."

"I am anxious to get a chance to handle the coir, and thin I don't think I am afther committing any great wrong by helping you to escape, for as far as the law is concerned yez will go free anyway, and I am only doing what is right in helping yez to escape from these spalpeens who are afther trying to get a chance to murther yez."

"You are right!" the sport exclaimed. "When you come to cipher the thing down you are really upholding the law instead of trying to defeat it."

"That is it exactly. Now, thin, this is the schame."

And O'Toole lowered his voice to a whisper while the sport bent forward to listen.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE ATTACK.

"THERE'S a d'sle of people been here to see you," the jailer remarked.

"Correct!" Blake admitted.

"And as I am a good-natured sort of a chap I havn't made any trouble about it, so the b'yes who happened to have a few drops of whisky wid 'em insisted upon my taking a drink."

"Now, thin, if this party, who is interested in yez, gives me a flask of whisky, which has been doctored so that it puts me to slape whin I drink it, and thin takes advantage of me slumbers to get yez out I will not be so much to blame."

"An error of judgment—that is all," Blake observed, with a smile.

"And, as I remarked before, as the judge and the sheriff are both inclined to think that ye did what was right, the chances are big that there will not be much of a row kicked up over the matter."

"Yes, I reckon that calculation is about right," the sport observed, thoughtfully.

"The party will be in here about tin o'clock," the jailer explained.

"A quarter past tin I will be paralyzed and yez can be after making tracks as soon as ye like," and then the Irishman chuckled gleefully.

"It is a great head you have, sir!" the sport declared.

"Oh, yis, I wasn't born yesterday!"

"It is a very cunning scheme and there is only one reason why it will not work."

The Irishman looked astonished.

"Upon me woord ye amaze me, for I can't see why it will not go through!"

"The reas'n is because I don't choose to run away," Blake replied.

"Yez don't choose to run away!" the jailer repeated, as though unable to comprehend the meaning of the other.

"That is what I said, and I mean every word of it too!" the sport declared.

"I very rarely indulge in any boasting—but I will say that never yet in my life have I been afraid to face the music. On the contrary I have always been ready to toe the scratch and meet whatever I had to face."

"Yes, but it is the gallows that these min m'ane to bring ye to!" the Irishman urged, evidently very much annoyed by the decision of the other.

"Oh, yes, I don't doubt but what they mean to do me all the mischief they can, but there is many a slip between the cup and the lip, you know," the sport retorted.

"What these men mean to do is one thing and what they will, or can do, is another.

"Men who can plan a game all right are not always able to carry it out."

"Be jabers! it's flying in the face of provi-

dence ye are!" the Irishman declared in an irritated way.

"Maybe I am, but that is just what I am going to do!" Blake declared, firmly.

Then there came a knock at the outside door.

"Whist! there's somebody coming! In wid ye!" the jailer cried.

Blake retreated to his cell, the Irishman locked the door and then proceeded to see who had knocked.

After he was out of sight of the jailer the sport laughed quietly.

"These fellows who are at the back of this little scheme may think that they are very smart, but, to use the Irishman's saying: 'I was not born yesterday,' and so it is not a difficult matter for me to understand just what kind of game they are trying to play."

"It was their idea that I, alarmed by the Irishman's yarn about a packed jury, would jump at the chance to escape."

"And after the jailer was overcome by the drugged liquor, the way to freedom being then open to me, I would leave the jail, and then these unknown friends who had engineered the scheme laying wait in ambush, in the near neighborhood, would have an opportunity to shoot me down without mercy."

"A very nice little plot, indeed!" and the sport laughed, contemptuously.

"And of course they would be justified in killing any one endeavoring to break jail when arrested upon a charge of having committed murder."

"I must be on my guard, though, for as the gang haven't succeeded in catching me in this trap they may try some other game."

Having come to this conclusion the sport thought it would be wise for him to see what the jailer was doing.

He heard the Irishman go to the door in answer to the knock, but had not heard him come away.

Blake stole with cautious steps to the grating and peeped through it, keeping as much in the shade as possible.

The Irishman was at the door holding a whispered conversation with somebody on the outside.

"Ahal that is suspicious," the sport murmured. "I would be willing to bet a good round sum that they are talking about me."

He came to this conclusion on account of the peculiar way in which the jailer acted.

Every now and then the Irishman turned his head and glanced toward the inner apartment, as though he was afraid that the prisoner was watching him.

"If there wasn't something wrong he would not care a continental whether I had my eyes on him or not," Blake declared.

The sport was careful to bob out of the way when he saw the jailer move, and so the Irishman did not detect that the sport was watching him.

Blake had an extra good pair of ears, but though he listened intently, he was not able to overhear any of the conversation, so cautious were the speakers.

The sport jumped to a conclusion, though, in regard to the matter.

"There isn't much doubt but what it is some of the gang, and the Irishman is explaining to them that I am not willing to walk into this little trap which they have set," he muttered.

Then the listening sport managed to catch a few words of the conversation.

"All right, I think that will do," O'Toole remarked. Then he shut the door and, crossing the apartment, came to the grating.

The sport had hastened to lie down upon the bed, and was apparently half-way to the land of dreams when the jailer spoke.

"Are yez aslape?" O'Toole asked.

"Eh, what is that?" asked the sport with a yawn, as if he had been suddenly roused from his slumbers.

"It's asking yez are ye aslape I am," the Irishman replied.

"Oh, no, I am awake."

"Would yez like a wee drop of good whisky for a nightcap?" asked O'Toole in his most insinuating tones, and held up a small flask as he spoke.

"Some good whisky, eh?" Blake exclaimed, rising to a sitting posture.

"Yes, sor, ye may say that widout the l'aste taste of a lie!" the jailer declared.

"And it is whisky, too, that Uncle Sam

has never been after getting a cent out of, do ye mind!"

"Real old mountain dew which has never paid duty."

"Sorra a cint!"

"Well, I don't mind if I do take a couple of drinks, and I am very much obliged to you for the chance!" Blake declared in his most affable way.

Then O'Toole passed the flask through the grating.

The sport removed the cork and smelt of the contents.

"Ahal this has the perfume of the real old stuff!" he exclaimed.

"And I don't doubt that it is the sort of sting to make a man's hair curl."

"Well, here's looking at you!" and then the sport put the flask to his lips and took a good, big drink apparently.

Just as he did so there came a knock at the door which demanded the attention of the jailer.

"Be afther hiding the liquor—don't I ave anybody see it!" the Irishman cautioned, and then he hurried to the door.

This gave Blake an opportunity to spill a cupful of the whisky on the floor so as to make it appear as if he had taken a couple of good-sized drinks.

In reality he had not allowed a drop to pass down his throat.

The applicant for admission proved to be a man very much under the influence of liquor who had got the idea into his head that the jail was a hotel where he could procure a bed for the night.

As soon as the Irishman discovered the condition of the man he slammed the door in his face.

The interruption though gave the sport a chance to reflect upon the situation.

"What is the game now?" he muttered.

"There is some trick in this whisky business—no doubt in my mind about that; the escape dodge didn't work, and so the gang have hatched a fresh scheme."

"What is it?"

"To drug me into insensibility so that the scoundrels can get a chance at me?"

"It is dollars to cents that is the game!"

"And it is dollars to cents too that I will beat it!" Blake declared.

"I will give these fellows a surprise party that they little expect!"

There was a sardonic smile on the face of the sport as he spoke.

"Let me see! supposing that I had drank the whisky what effect would be produced?"

"Drowsiness—a desire to sleep, of course!"

"Good! I must get sleepy immediately!"

So after the jailer got rid of the drunken man and returned to the door of the cell he found Blake holding on to the bars, and blinking like an owl suddenly exposed to the light.

"Say, old fellow, I am awful sleepy, and I'm blessed if this blamed whisky of yours hasn't gone straight to my head!"

"Is that so?" exclaimed the jailer in a tone indicative of profound astonishment.

"Yes, I will be hanged if it isn't about the strongest whisky that I ever tackled!"

"It is the real old stuff and no mistake!" the Irishman declared.

"I only took a couple of drinks—of course they were rather big ones, but I will be hanged if I thought that two drinks of whisky could knock me out."

"Ah, yis, but this is the pure article, do ye mind!"

"It is the strongest whisky that I ever struck, you bet your life!" the sport declared with a prodigious yawn.

"Lie down and be afther taking a snooze," the Irishman recommended.

"That is a good idea and I will do it," the sport replied.

"I feel outrageously sleepy anyway."

"So do I, and it is as much as I can do to keep me two eyes open," O'Toole remarked.

"I will be afther taking a couple of good drinks and then I'll stretch out on me bunk."

"Furst I will turn the lamp down so that the light will not be afther kaping us awake."

The Irishman had taken the flask from the sport, now he stood on a chair and regulated the lamp.

"If the whole blamed house got on fire I

don't believe that it would keep me awake," the sport remarked with another series of yawns.

Blake played his part so well that the Irishman had no suspicion there was any deception about the matter.

After turning down the lamp O'Toole went to the door as if to make sure that it was securely fastened, then he sauntered carelessly to the grating and looked in at the sport.

Blake lay extended at full length on the bunk, apparently sound asleep.

"He's in the arms of Murphy fast enough!" the Irishman muttered.

"Begorrah it takes a man like meself to do the trick."

Then he proceeded to his own bunk which was in one corner of the outer apartment, half reclined on it and lit his pipe.

The Irishman smoked pipe after pipe as the minutes passed slowly away until midnight came.

O'Toole had an old-fashioned silver watch which he consulted from time to time, and when at last the hands pointed to twelve o'clock, he rose, stole quietly on tip-toes to the grated window and looked in at the prisoner.

Blake was lying in exactly the same position as he had previously occupied and the Irishman chuckled with delight.

"Aha! it is a foine job it is going to be this time!" O'Toole muttered.

"The furst wan didn't work but the scheme is going through all right."

"Now thin, if the b'yes are at hand I will be afther laving them in," he muttered as he advanced with cautious tread to the door.

He turned the key in the massive lock and drew back the bolts which guarded the portal.

Swinging the door open he looked forth into the night.

Despite the fact that it was after midnight, an hour when all the inhabitants of the mountain village were buried in slumber, the moment the door opened three dark forms stole out of the gloom and advanced toward the jail.

The Irishman evidently expected them for he evinced no surprise when the three made their appearance.

With noiseless steps the three men entered the jail.

Blake was on the watch, for the moment he heard the Irishman turn the key in the lock of the door he sprung to his feet, and hastily rolled the blanket and placed it lengthwise on the bed, so that owing to the gloom which pervaded the cell it had the appearance of a sleeping form.

Then the sport took up a position so he could look through the grated window and see what was going on in the outer apartment and yet could not be seen by any one in the other room owing to his getting out of the rays of the light.

He could plainly distinguish the three men though as soon as they entered, and just as soon as he caught a glimpse of them he saw that he had not made any mistake in anticipating that danger menaced him.

The men were disguised.

Slouch hats were pulled down low over their brows and they wore black masks which completely concealed their faces.

As the Irishman did not seem to be at all surprised by the appearance of the masked men it was evident that he was in league with them.

O'Toole closed the door as soon as the men entered and held a whispered conference with them.

Then one of the men produced a rope with which he proceeded to bind the Irishman's arms.

After O'Toole's arms were securely tied, the jailer extended himself on his bunk and the masked man bound his legs, winding up this strange proceeding by fastening a fan-shaped gag in his mouth.

Blake was too shrewd not to understand what all this meant.

It was to give the jailer a chance to relate how he was summoned to the door by a man who pretended he had an important message to deliver to him, then a gang had rushed in and overpowered him.

Being taken so completely by surprise, the gang bound and gagged him before he could give an alarm.

And, of course, being thus rendered help-

less it was not possible for him to prevent the intruders from attacking the prisoner.

"A very nice little scheme, but it will not work!" the sport muttered, with a grim smile, and as he spoke he drew the revolver from its hiding-place.

"These fellows think that I am helpless from the effects of the drugged whisky, and therefore that they will not have any trouble in putting me out of the way, but in about two seconds after they make the first move in the game to send me to the other world I fancy that that they will come to the conclusion that they have made the biggest kind of a mistake."

After getting through with the jailer the three men held a whispered consultation, then one and all drew ugly-looking bowie-knives.

"Knives, eh?" the sport muttered, watching the movements of the three from the gloom of his cell.

"Well, knives don't make any noise."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SPORT SURPRISES THE INTRUDERS.

The peculiar glitter was in the eyes of Blake, the signal that his temper was up and danger was near.

The sport was not naturally bloodthirsty, and as a rule when he got into a difficulty he did not seek to take the life of an opponent unless he deemed that it was absolutely necessary to protect his own.

And even on this occasion when he was fully aware that these three midnight assassins had come with the deliberate intention of killing him in cold blood yet he rather shrank from killing the men, although he held their lives at his mercy, owing to the peculiar circumstances of the case, as truly as ever an executioner did that of a criminal, bound and helpless upon a scaffold.

"I will give the scoundrels a lesson though which they will be apt to remember to their dying day!" Blake muttered.

The door of the cell opened into the apartment, and Blake crouched in the corner furthest from the bunk, his revolver ready in his hand.

The men unlocked the cell door, proceeding with the utmost caution, and then peeped into the apartment.

The dummy figure on the bunk, which they could just make out in the gloom, they took to be the sleeping man.

A moment they halted in the doorway, and then stole in with uplifted knives.

But when they reached the side of the bunk, they discovered the cheat, and turned with cries of rage.

This was Blake's opportunity, and he at once opened fire upon them.

With the precision of a machine he acted.

Three shots he fired, and each bullet mowed down a man.

And although the sport would have preferred to wound rather than kill, yet as the fellows were so close on him with their knives, he was compelled to make the shots so effective that the masked marauders could not assail him.

And so it followed that two of the intruders were killed outright, while the other was so badly wounded as to be incapable of moving.

It was a most complete victory for the sport.

"Good! I have three shots still left if I happen to strike any more trouble," Blake muttered, as he returned the revolver to its hiding-place.

Then he possessed himself of the revolver of one of the dead men and slipped three cartridges out of the cylinder.

"This is the weapon with which I did the trick, of course," the sport muttered with a sarcastic smile.

He proceeded to the outer apartment.

O'Toole had risen to a sitting position, and was endeavoring to free himself from his bonds.

The fastenings had been arranged in such a way that it was not a difficult matter for the Irishman to loosen the bonds.

A lady he had displaced the gag, and when Blake made his appearance in the outer room, he was hard at work on the knot of the cord which bound his wrists.

A look of extreme surprise appeared on his face when Blake made his appearance with the revolver.

"Oho, musha! what have you been asther doing?" the jailer cried.

"Nothing much," the sport replied in his careless way.

"I have just been having a little picnic with three fellows who took it into their heads to pay me a call without going through the ceremony of giving me warning of their intentions."

"This b'ates Bannagher!" O'Toole declared, so astounded by this unlooked-for turn of affairs that he hardly knew what to say.

"I see that the scoundrels put up a job on you too," the sport remarked.

By this time O'Toole had succeeded in undoing the knot and so freeing his wrists.

"Yis, it is taken by surprise I was, entirely!" the Irishman declared and then he set to work on the cord which bound his ankles.

"They trussed you up after the fashion of a turkey ready for roasting," Blake observed.

"Yis, the murdering spalpeens knocked at the dure and made out that they had an important message for me, thin whin I opened it, they gagged and bound me in a twinkling.

"Shure! it is afraid of my life I was, for I thought the blaggards would be asther murdering me."

"I fancy from the way that two of them went down that neither one of them will ever be apt to trouble anybody in this world again."

"Do yez think that they are dead min?" the Irishman inquired, very much surprised.

"That is my opinion," the sport replied.

"I would not have killed the men if I could have helped it, but when a fellow is attacked by three masked scoundrels with knives in their hands, he can't afford to be very particular whether he shoots to kill or not."

"No, of coarse not! Ye are not to blame if ye kill the dirty spalpeens!" O'Toole declared with well-assumed indignation.

By this time he had succeeded in getting the cord undone and removed it from his ankles, getting up with a sigh of relief.

"Upon me wourd I never heard of anything like this in me life! And they were asther going for yez wid knives?" O'Toole asked, affecting to be greatly interested.

"Yes, the scoundrels intended to murder me while I slept."

"How lucky ye woke in time—and how did it happen that yez was asther waking up?" the Irishman asked in a wheedling tone.

"Oh, I am a very light sleeper and the moment the fellows touched the door I woke up."

"Then I grappled with the first man, got his revolver away from him; and after I secured the weapon it did not take me long to lay the gang out."

The jailer looked at the sport with an expression of great wonder.

He could not understand it at all. What sort of a man was this stranger to be able to perform such feats with so little trouble?

At this point there came loud and hurried knocks at the door of the jail.

"I reckon that my shots have alarmed the neighborhood," Blake observed.

"I shouldn't be surprised," the Irishman coincided.

The supposition of the sport was correct.

When O'Toole opened the door a dozen men came trooping in, all armed with some kind of a weapon, and their scanty attire showed that they had dressed in haste.

"What's up? What's broke? Anybody hurt?" cried the men, all speaking together.

"Yis, sor! there has been the devil to pay!" the Irishman declared.

And then he related what had occurred.

The citizens were amazed.

"B'gosh! this beats anything that I ever heard of in all my time!" one aged, gray-bearded man declared, voicing the opinion of the crowd.

"Gintlemen, I don't ax ye to belave me but go into the cell and see the min for yourselves!" O'Toole exclaimed.

The Irishman turned up the light and the citizens trooped into the cell.

There lay the two dead men, with their knives still clutched in their hands, and the

wounded man, groaning in pain, in the corner, where he had fallen.

Blake stood in the doorway gazing on the scene, O'Toole having conducted the citizens into the cell.

A surprise was in store for the citizens for when the masks were removed from the dead men it was found that the pair were the Gumridge brothers, Norman and Bijah, the cousins of the Hawkinses, and the wounded man who was taking his defeat so much to heart was William Hawkins.

"B'gosh if this here don't beat anything I ever heered on in my time!" the aged citizen declared who had taken it upon himself to act as the director of the proceedings.

"Both of the Gumridge boys killed as dead as mackerel, and young Hawkins a groaning and a-carrying on just as if he had got his ticket for the other world too."

"I wasn't really particular about killing the men," Blake explained. "Although I was satisfied that they meant to settle my account with this world if they could, but under the circumstances there wasn't any time for me to decide where I ought to hit them."

"I succeeded in doing it though," the sport added, quietly.

The citizens looked at the sharp, then glanced at the fallen men in wonder.

"Begob! yez must be the devil!" O'Toole exclaimed in profound amazement.

"Oh, no, these fellows that I killed are the devils!" Blake rejoined.

"But I say, stranger, why on earth did these men want to try a game of this kind?" the gray-bearded citizen asked in perplexity.

"The reason is plain enough," Blake replied. "They wanted revenge."

"They were six of them waylaid me on the road—six mighty hard cases, I reckon, and the men who have been responsible for whatever deviltry has been done in this neighborhood."

"I killed two of them and badly wounded a third, the other three saving their bacon by taking to their heels like champion sprinters."

"These men here are the three who got away, and when I was locked up in the jail they came to the conclusion that as I had been deprived of my weapons they would be able to avenge the death of their comrades if they could only contrive to get at me."

"B'gosh! they made the biggest kind of a mistake!" the aged citizen blurted out.

"Yes, the scheme did not work exactly as they had calculated," the sport remarked.

"These little games will slip up once in a while; the old saying about the best laid plans of mice and men not running according to Hoyle comes in here, you know."

"Both of these Gumridge boys were bad eggs," the old man observed.

"I have known them ever since they were hatched, and from the time when they were big enough to git into mischief, they have been in trouble more or less right along."

"Well, they are out of business now, and will never trouble anybody again," Blake observed.

"For the Lord's sake won't somebody go for a doctor?" Bill Hawkins cried at this point.

"Do you want to see me bleed to death here?"

At this point the doctor made his appearance, having been warned that his attendance was needed.

The doctor made a hasty examination, and, much to Hawkins's delight, assured him that the wound, although a serious one and likely to cause him much suffering, yet was far from being a mortal hurt.

"I'm very much oblieged to ye, doctor," the mountaineer remarked.

"And I kin tell you, too, that you have taken a heap of care off my mind."

"I reckon I have had a mighty close call of it this time," he continued. "And I tell you what it is, feller-citizens, if I get over this hyer thing I will turn over a new leaf."

"That is the kind of talk that I like to hear," Blake declared.

"And as there isn't anything like starting in time, suppose you make a clean breast of it now and tell just how it was that your gang came to tackle me in the first place."

There was a look of indecision on Bill Hawkins's face and he shook his head slowly.

"I reckon that I ain't strong enough to talk much," he replied.

"Oh, yes, you are!" the sport declared. "It will not hurt you a bit to tell what you know and it is certain that your mind will be relieved of a load and that ought to make you feel decidedly better. Is that correct, doctor?" he asked, appealing to the medical man.

"Yes, it seems to me that it is so," the physician replied.

"I know more about this little picnic than you think," the sport declared.

"I understand perfectly well that these Gumridges had it in for me right from the beginning."

"As soon as I stopped at their house to inquire the way they made up their mind to go for me."

"They got me to dismount and take a drink with them, and while I was in the house a thorn was driven into the hoof of my horse so that the poor beast would go lame on the road."

"They knew that your house was the next one I would come to on the road and it was their calculation that by the time I would reach it my beast would go so lame that I would be forced to seek shelter there."

"Things turned just exactly as they anticipated. My horse did go lame, I accepted the hospitalities of your house, and in the middle of the night your gang made an attack on me."

"I was on my guard though and so was able to give you and your pals such a warm reception that you were glad to depart in a hurry."

"Now, just to satisfy my curiosity, I should really like to know why your gang made such a dead set at me."

"'Twasn't me nor my brother nohow who got the thing up!" Bill Hawkins declared in a sullen way.

"I don't know who engineered the game, of course, but I am quite sure that both you and your brother were in it—took as prominent a part as any of the rest, in fact, and you may thank your lucky stars that both of you got off with a wound instead of being stretched out stark and still."

"It was Lige Brockston and Black Dan MacNabb who got up the hull thing!" Bill Hawkins declared, in a sudden outburst.

"Them two was the head devils who got us and the Gumridge boys into this thing."

"Them fellers are regular outlaws and have been for years, and they fool us with yarns of how easy it was to get money if we only had a leetle backbone, and so we agreed to go in with them."

"And a mighty unlucky day it was for you when you made the decision," Blake observed.

"Yes, I reckon it was and no mistake!" Bill Hawkins replied, ruefully.

"Both Lige Brockston and Black Dan used to hang out down around Lexington, but they got into so much trouble down thar that the country became to hot to hold 'em, and so they came up into this region, but they have a heap of friends down there who allers send them word when the officers are arter them, and a few days ago they got warning that a detective in disguise was going for to try to hunt them down, and in order to prevent the folks in this deestrict from suspecting who he was, and what game he was trying to play, he was going to come in from the upper end and make out that he was going to Lexington."

"Ah, yes, I begin to understand now," the sport observed.

"The gang believed that I was the spy against whom they had been warned, and so went for me red-hot."

"It was Black Dan's idee to capture you so as to find out who put you up to the game," Bill Hawkins explained.

The arrival of the sheriff at this point put an end to the conversation.

The official was much amazed at what had taken place.

Bill Hawkins was removed under guard to the hotel, and then the town resumed its normal state.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SPORT ON TRIAL.

AFTER the crowd departed and Blake was again locked in his cell, he went to bed and enjoyed a good night's rest.

It was his idea that he was not likely to be troubled by any more intruders after the terrible lesson which he had given to his visitors.

O'Toole did not know what to make of the affair, and the more he pondered over it the greater became the mystery.

That the sport, who was supposed to be fast asleep, should have been able to wrest a weapon from the hands of one of his assailants, and then kill two of them and disable the third without suffering the least damage himself, seemed to be something very like a miracle.

The Irishman was only perplexed about the matter, but there is no doubt that he would have been considerably alarmed if he had any suspicion that the sport knew of the part which he had played in the matter, and had made up his mind to call him to an account if his trial resulted in an acquittal, so as to make him once again master of his actions.

Blake had a good memory when it came to an affair of this kind, and he had made up his mind to give the Irishman a lesson which would be apt to last him for a long time.

Of all things in this world he hated and despised a treacherous scoundrel of this kind, for he knew that it was the Irishman who gave the gang an opportunity to get into his cell, and if he was not dead, it was through no efforts that the jailer had made to save him.

The day for the trial came, and the court-room was crowded as it had never been crowded before.

The fame of the stranger sport had spread for miles around, and the people flocked in to the county seat, eager to see the man who had broken up the desperado gang of the Yellow Beards.

The trial was hurried through in short order.

There wasn't one man out of a hundred who did not think the sport was perfectly justified in killing the men.

And as judge, jury, prosecuting attorney, and all the officers of the court were of this opinion it was no wonder that the jury brought in a verdict of not guilty without taking the trouble to leave their seats.

And when the sport left the court-room a regular ovation was extended to him, and he was escorted to the hotel by a crowd of admiring citizens.

If Blake had not been an extremely temperate man, and one who had the courage to decline invitations to drink, there is no doubt that he would have been very much the worse for liquor in an extremely short time, for about every man in the crowd was anxious that the stranger should have a drink with him as a sample of true Kentucky hospitality.

"Now, gentlemen, it is a clear impossibility for me to drink with each one of you!" Blake declared. "For I am only a man and not a demijohn."

"But I will tell you what I will do. I will take a single drink with you all collectively, and that is the best I can do."

The crowd was prepared to be pleased with almost anything that the sport might do, so this proposal satisfied them.

After the liquor was drank the sport went up-stairs to his room, for he had made up his mind to remain for the night at the hotel.

Hardly had he reached the apartment when a message was brought to the effect that Judge Langworthy and Sheriff Buttonwood would be pleased to have an interview with him.

"Show them up!" commanded the sport.

Soon the judge and the sheriff made their appearance.

"We called to congratulate you upon the result of your trial," the judge explained. "Of course, in my mind there wasn't a doubt from the beginning how the affair would turn out."

"You acted in self defense—strictly in self defense if ever a man did in this world."

"Not a doubt about it!" the sheriff assented.

"Of course I felt perfectly sure that you would be acquitted," the judge explained.

"If I had had any doubts about the subject I should have advised you to cut and run without waiting to be tried, speaking as

a private citizen, you understand, and not in my official capacity."

"That is just exactly the advice which I should have given," the sheriff coincided.

"You did a good job in cleaning out the gang and you are entitled to the thanks of the community."

"I have been thinking about the situation of these Hawkins brothers," the sport remarked.

"The pair were both members of the gang and they undoubtedly would not have scrupled to have killed me in cold blood if the leaders of the party had concluded that such a course was necessary."

"Yes, both on 'em were bad eggs, there isn't any mistake about that!" the sheriff declared.

"Still, neither one of 'em was cut out for a leader; you see, I have known the pair ever since they came into this world and so am able to come to a correct opinion about them."

"Lige Brockston and Black Dan were the men who put up the job and the Hawkinses wasn't anything but tools."

"Yes, I have no doubt that is correct," Blake remarked. "And so under the circumstances, although I would be fully justified in prosecuting both of the Hawkins brothers for their attack on me, yet as the pair were badly damaged in the fight I am content to call the thing square."

Both the judge and the sheriff expressed their approval of this decision.

"No doubt that both of the men are sorry enough now that they took part in the attack on you," the judge observed.

"Yes, they both received a lesson which they will be apt to remember for a long while," the sport asserted.

"So, as I said, I am content to allow the matter to rest where it is, for in my opinion I have got decidedly the best of the affair."

"Oh, yes!" the sheriff declared, while the judge nodded assent.

"But as I am always very scrupulous in paying my debts, particularly debts of vengeance, it follows that there is a little matter of this kind to which I must attend before I leave this section," the sport remarked.

The others looked surprised, and then Blake related how the Irish jailer, O'Toole, had admitted the masked men into the jail.

"The miserable hound!" Buttonwood exclaimed in righteous indignation.

"I am not very much surprised to discover that the Irishman is not to be trusted, for I have never had a good opinion of the man," Langworthy observed.

"He was paid of course for the service," the sport asserted.

"The first scheme was to persuade me that I was certain to be convicted, get me to endeavor to escape, and then the scoundrels, ambushed in the neighborhood of the jail, would have shot me down in cold blood, and under such circumstances as that no one could blame them for killing a man who was attempting to escape from jail when imprisoned upon a murder charge."

"It was a mighty slick game!" the sheriff declared. "But not slick enough to catch you, eh, Mr. Blake?" the judge observed with a smile.

"No, for during the time I have sojourned on this footstool I have seen a great deal of life, and this game of inducing a prisoner to escape so as to get a chance to shoot him down is an extremely old one," Blake explained.

"If I had had a good opinion of the jailer, possibly I might have been led to believe that he was honest when he professed to be actuated by a desire to serve me, but I think I have some skill in reading character and after a short conversation with the Irishman I came to the conclusion that he was an unmitigated scoundrel—a man who could not be trusted at all, and so when I declined his offer to help me to escape I was on my guard, for I felt certain that some other scheme would be tried."

"You certainly managed to come out away ahead," the sheriff observed with a dry chuckle.

"Yes, and now I propose to call Mr. O'Toole to a reckoning!" the sport declared.

"So far he is decidedly ahead of the game for he has the money which the gang paid him as a bribe, and as he was found ap-

parently securely bound when the citizens rushed into the jail, attracted by the sound of firing, his story that he had been surprised and overpowered by the gang so that he had not been able to give an alarm was believed," Blake explained.

"Oh, yes no one questioned the story," the judge remarked.

"Wal, I don't pretend to be smarter than any one else," Buttonwood declared. "But I will say that when the Irishman told his yarn I thought it was mighty queer, for unless the men had hit him a clip in the head so as to lay him out right in the beginning, I didn't see how they could have prevented him from giving an alarm if he had tried to raise a row."

"It was my idea though that he didn't try," the sheriff added.

"I never had much opinion of the Irishman's courage, and so it was my notion that when the gang rushed at him he wilted immediately and didn't try to make any trouble."

"That was about the idea that I had of the matter," the judge assented.

"It was all a cut and dried plan from the beginning to the end," the sport declared.

"The Irishman was bribed for a certain sum of money to allow the scoundrels a chance to get at me, and I don't doubt that he is laughing in his sleeve at the ease with which he fooled the town with his cock and bull story of how he was surprised and overpowered."

"The fellow is a blamed scoundrel and he ought to be punished!" the sheriff exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, there isn't a doubt about it" the judge asserted. "Such a fellow is not fit to hold so responsible a position as that of jailer, for if he is so lost to a moral sense of his duty as to admit people into the jail to attack a prisoner, he would certainly be equally ready to take a bribe to allow a prisoner to escape."

"You kin bet your life on that!" Buttonwood cried.

"And he ought to be bounced, and bounced mighty quick," the sheriff continued.

"No doubt about it!" the judge assented. "And you can rest assured that I shall make it my business to do what I can to have him removed."

"That is what should be done," the sport remarked. "But his removal will not square the little account which I have with him."

"Oh, no," the sheriff assented, while the judge nodded.

"This is a little matter to which I must personally attend," Blake observed.

"Sart'in'" Buttonwood replied. "But if you are calculating upon gitting that blamed Irishman to meet you in a good, squar' fight, I reckon you don't stand no show of pulling the thing off."

"O'Toole has lived here for five or six years and although he is rather inclined to be ugly and quarrelsome when he gets a little liquor on board, yet as I never heerd of his gitting into a fight, I reckon that he allers backs out when the time comes for him to toe the scratch."

"Well, he will have to come up to the mark and take his medicine like a man," the sport declared.

"I intend to get square with him, for the fellow richly deserves to be punished for his treachery."

"No doubt about that!" the sheriff assented. "He is a pisoned snake and no mistake."

"Where will I be likely to find him and at what time?" Blake asked.

"I suppose there is some saloon where he hangs out when he isn't at the jail?"

"Oh, yes," Buttonwood responded. "There is a saloon right opposite to the calaboose, and as a rule O'Toole spends more time there than he does at the jail, for unless there is a prisoner to look after, he doesn't have much to do."

"I will make it a point to visit that saloon this afternoon and see if I can't make it warm for the Irishman," the sport announced.

After a few more words of no importance the judge and Buttonwood withdrew.

"I was calculating to go out of town this afternoon but I reckon I will have to stay and see the fun," the sheriff remarked.

"Yes, so shall I," the judge coincided,

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SPORT INTERVIEWS THE IRISHMAN.

AFTER Blake's visitors departed the summons came for dinner.

The sport did full justice to the meal, and after he finished the repast he got a cigar and went out for a stroll.

It did not take him long to walk out of the town into the open country, for the county seat was only a small place, containing but a few hundred inhabitants.

The country road along which the sport strolled was thickly fringed with bushes at intervals, and Blake went on until he came to a group of sturdy young hickories.

He cut a cane, about as big around as a man's thumb at the largest end, trimmed it neatly, and when the work was completed flourished it in the air with all the skill of a fencing-master.

"There, I think that is about what I want," the sport murmured.

"And if I don't succeed in dusting the jacket of that rascal of an Irishman to my heart's content then it will be because I am not as good a man as I think I am, and that scoundrel is a deuced sight better."

Having secured the weapon with which he intended to chastise the Irishman, Blake proceeded to retrace his steps.

Entering the town he proceeded to the saloon opposite the jail.

It was a common, ordinary drinking shop and as the sport approached it O'Toole came out of the saloon with a couple of his acquaintances, and was about to proceed across the street to the jail when Blake accosted him.

"Hello, you Irishman, I want to speak to you!" the sport exclaimed.

There was such evidence of warlike intention in the voice of the Fresh that the attention of all within hearing was at once attracted.

The Irishman and his friends halted immediately, but every one else in the neighborhood began to draw near to the spot.

The judge and the sheriff were at a window in the second story of a house next to the saloon.

They were anxious to see the fight, but as both held an office they did not deem it "just the cheese," as Buttonwood remarked, to view the conflict from the street level, for some fault-finders might complain that they ought to have interfered and prevented the difficulty.

O'Toole was busy in conversation with his companions and so had not happened to see the sport until his attention was attracted by Blake's voice.

The sport was within twenty feet of the jailer when he spoke, and as O'Toole came to a halt, turning to face Blake, a few steps brought the Fresh within a yard of the Irishman.

O'Toole was not in a good humor.

He had been drinking quite freely, and was just enough under the influence of liquor to make him ugly.

Then too he had been engaged in a political discussion in the saloon and had got pretty well heated over the matter, so he was just in the mood to quarrel.

So, acting on the impulse of the moment, he exclaimed:

"Bad 'cess to ye! Is that the way ye are afther sp'aking to a gentleman?"

"You don't call yourself a gentleman do you, you miserable specimen of humanity?" Blake demanded.

"Eh, what is that?" cried the jailer, taken completely by surprise by this attack.

"What the devil do ye m'aue?"

"O'Toole, I am a plain man of few words, and when I have anything to say to a fellow I always make it a point to speak so I will be certain that I will not be misunderstood."

"Yis, that is all right, but what have yez got to do wid me?" the Irishman asked, very much astonished.

"Why, I have got a bone to pick with you, that is all."

"Wid me?"

"No one else."

"Bedad! I don't understand it!"

"You will in a moment," Blake retorted.

"I do not doubt that you think you have played your game so cunningly that no one could get on to your tricks, but that is where you have made the biggest kind of a mistake."

"Gentlemen, I want you all to understand that this Irishman is the meanest kind of a rascal!" the sport exclaimed to the crowd.

By this time there were a couple of dozen people congregated, attracted by the quarrel.

"It is a lie, and I defy yez to prove it!" O'Toole cried in a rage.

"Wait until I tell my story and then these gentlemen can judge!" the sport retorted.

"This man is the keeper of the jail; it is his business to look after the prisoners, not only to prevent them from escaping but to see that no harm comes to them."

"How did he act with me?

"I don't suppose ther's one in the crowd who don't know all particulars about the attack made on me in the jail."

"How did the men get in? This scoundrel declares that they surprised and overpowered him, but it is not the truth."

"He tried to drug me with doctored whisky, but I suspected what he was up to so did not drink."

"I pretended to though, and appeared to fall asleep so as to lead him on."

"He fell into the trap, and thinking I was not able to watch him admitted the masked men into the jail."

"It is a lie!" O'Toole roared in a rage.

"Oh, no, it isn't! It is the truth and you know that it is the truth."

"I watched him, gentlemen, through the barred windows of the cell and I saw him with my own eyes admit the masked men into the jail, and they went through the ceremony of binding him so that suspicion might be averted."

"This scoundrel, gentlemen, coolly and deliberately sold me to these masked villains, and that I am not dead now is through no fault of his."

"It is a lie from beginning to end!" the Irishman howled.

"I'm a gentleman, and I'll have yer life, ye murthing villain!"

And with the word O'Toole drew his revolver.

The Fresh was on his guard for just such a movement.

He did not attempt to draw a weapon himself though.

But with his hawk-like eyes he watched the Irishman's movements.

O'Toole was anything but "quick on the draw," to use the Western lingo, and after he got his revolver out he was obliged to wait and raise the hammer before he could fire, for it was not a tool with double action.

Blake waited until the Irishman got the weapon out and was attempting to cock it, then with a dextrous sweep of his stick he knocked the revolver out of the Irishman's hand and sent it spinning through the air.

O'Toole uttered a howl of rage and rushed at the sport with all the fury of a mad bull.

But as the Fresh expected just such an action on the part of the other he was able to avoid the attempt of O'Toole to seize him by dodging under his arm.

And then he fetched the Irishman a whack on the back which made O'Toole howl with pain.

In attempting to wheel about quickly the Irishman was so clumsy that he caught his feet together and tumbled to his knees.

This was an opportunity which the sport was quick to seize upon and the lively "tattoo" which Blake beat with the stick upon the back of O'Toole caused the Irishman to roar with rage and pain at the top of his lungs.

It was really a ridiculous sight, and the bystanders were fairly convulsed with laughter.

Every time that O'Toole essayed to rise the sport beat him to the ground again with a tremendous whack.

Blake was keeping his word and dusting the Irishman's jacket in the most thorough manner.

No man in the crowd had ever seen such a thrashing administered.

The Irishman was a dull brute, really a cur at heart, and although the whisky which he had drank so freely had inspired him to attack the sport, yet now that he was getting well thrashed he commenced to roar for mercy.

"I'm b'ate, I'm b'ate!" he yelled. "For the love of heaven will ye stop? Do yez be af-

ther wanting to kill me entirely? Ow, owl it's being murthered I am!"

The crowd roared in delight; for the Irishman was a very unpopular man.

CHAPTER XIX.

ON THE ROAD.

"Get out, you cur!" Blake exclaimed with a parting whack. "And let this lesson teach you to be more careful how you act in the future."

The Irishman did not wait for a second bidding, but scrambled to his feet and hurried into the jail, swearing to himself at a great rate.

"It is not often that I take the law into my own hands, fellow-citizens," the sport explained to the crowd. "But this was a case where the circumstances seemed to demand it."

A chorus of assent went up from the bystanders, and then the sport sauntered into the hotel.

There in a few minutes he was joined by the judge and the sheriff.

They explained to the sport how they had witnessed the chastisement from an upper window and complimented him upon the manner in which he had executed the job.

"The fellow is a vile rascal, and really ought to be killed," Blake declared. "But as I do not care to play the role of an executioner unless the position is forced on me, I am content to let the scoundrel off with a sound thrashing."

"I shall make it my business to see that he is removed from his position of jailer," the judge remarked.

And to dismiss the subject, so we need not refer to it again, we will say that Mr. Langworthy was as good as his word.

O'Toole lost his position and the townsmen made so much fun of him on account of his punishment that he was glad to leave the place.

"Well, I will bid you good-by, gentlemen," the sport said. "For it is not likely that I will tarry many hours in this section now that I am free to depart."

"I think that my horse must be in a condition to travel now and if so I shall go at once."

The officials shook hands with the Fresh, and wished him all sorts of luck, and then departed.

Blake set out for the Hawkins farm.

"I shall prob'ly find Belle there," the sport mused as he traversed the lonely road which led to the old place.

"Both of her brothers are in town in the hands of the doctor and so she is all alone on the farm."

This surmise proved to be the truth, for as the sport approached the house, the girl came out to meet him.

"I am glad that you got off all right!" Belle exclaimed.

"You are acquainted with the result of the trial then?" Blake asked.

"Oh, yes, one of the neighbors who was present stopped on his way home and told me all the particulars."

"I have become quite an object of curiosity now to the people since the knowledge of my brothers' ill-doing has become known," the girl remarked with a sad look.

"Yes, I presume so."

"It has been a dreadful blow to me, for I have always held my head so high," the girl explained.

"Both my father and mother were good, honest folks and if they were alive I know this terrible disclosure would bow them to the ground with shame."

"Perhaps it will console you a little to know that the worst has already happened," the sport remarked.

"It is not my intention to prosecute your brothers, for I think they have already been severely punished, and I have had too a conversation with both the county judge and the sheriff in regard to the matter, and neither one of them is inclined to push the case."

"I am very glad indeed to hear it, and I am much obliged to you for your kindness, but the mischief is done, and I will never again be able to hold up my head in this neighborhood."

"It is not your fault and you ought not to be blamed."

"Very true, but the shame of my brothers'

evil deeds will cling to me, and I feel that I cannot bear it."

"Yes, it is hard, of course, but it is one of those things which can be lived down."

"I presume that now you are free to depart you will go away as soon as you can," the girl observed in an abstracted way.

"Such is my intention. As soon as my horse is ready to go on I shall not tarry long."

"The horse is all right," the girl responded. "As soon as I received word that you had been acquitted I took the horse out of the shed and walked her up and down the road so as to see if she was in condition to go on, for I had an idea that you would want to get away as soon as possible."

"How is the poor beast?"

"She is able to travel."

"I am glad of that, for you surmised correctly when you thought I would like to push on as soon as possible."

"My experience here has been anything but agreeable, and the quicker I get away from this section, the better I will like it."

"I do not wonder that you feel in this way, and under the circumstances I would be glad if I could go away from this neighborhood, too," the girl exclaimed with a sigh.

"It will be dreadful for me to remain here where the finger of scorn will be pointed at me, for as I received a far better education than the young people in this section can boast, I have always been envied, and now that this disgrace has fallen upon me, there will be plenty glad of the chance to mock and deride me."

"Well, situated as you are I think it would be the best course for you to leave this neighborhood for awhile, particularly if you have friends to whom you could go."

The girl shook her head.

"I hav'n't," she replied. "I was born and brought up in this district, and the only relatives that I have in the world are my two brothers."

"Where will you go?"

"To some place where no one knows anything about me—where I can hide myself away, for I cannot bear to be pointed at as the sister of two would-be murderers!" the girl cried vehemently.

"Well, Lexington would be as good a place as I know of," the sport remarked.

"It is a good-sized town, and as it is some distance off, you will not be apt to meet any one there who knows you."

"Yes, I thought of Lexington," the girl observed. "And in a big place like that I ought to be able to get something to do."

"As it happens I am not absolutely penniless, for though I haven't got any money, yet I have a colt which I raised myself, and an old farmer four miles down the road has repeatedly offered me a hundred dollars for him."

"That will furnish you with enough money to keep you some time," Blake observed.

"Yes, that is what I calculated, and I ought to be able to get something to do before it is exhausted."

"I should think so."

"There is a stage station six miles off, two miles beyond the house of the farmer where I am going to sell the horse," Belle explained.

"I thought I would ride over to the farmer's house, get the money for the horse, and then walk to the stage station—take the coach there and go to the railroad station where I can get a train for Lexington."

"That is a good programme it seems to me," the sport declared.

"But as I have never been out in the world at all I shrink from going into a city like Lexington, where I do not know anybody, all alone, and I thought I would ask if you would mind going with me, and getting some nice respectable place where I could remain until I can find something to do?"

And as the girl spoke she looked pleadingly into the face of the sport.

"No, certainly not!" Blake replied without a moment's hesitation.

"I will be glad to do all I can for you. I have not forgotten that it was owing to your warning that I was able to prepare for the attack on me, and if I had not been put upon my guard the chances are great that I would have been materially damaged."

"But as you will make much better time going by rail than I will, for I shall not dare to push my horse on very fast, you had better wait for a couple of days before you start."

"Yes, that will be wise, for it will give you time to reach Lexington before I do."

Then the sport saddled his horse and set out, bidding the girl a friendly good-by.

The rest had brought the brown mare around all right, and on the evening of the second day Blake rode into Lexington.

CHAPTER XX.

AN ADVENTURE.

THE Fresh was rather short of money, for luck had not been coming his way for some time, and so he put up at a second rate hotel in the neighborhood of the depot.

After supper he strolled into the office, lit a cigar, and entered into conversation with the landlord, a fat, jolly old man.

"The town seems to be tolerably lively," the sport remarked.

"Yas, thar's quite a heap of people in the burg," the host replied.

"The races begin next week and thar's going to be a crowd this year. I reckon."

"It promises to be a large meeting then?" the sport asked.

"One of the biggest, I reckon, that we have ever had in the town."

"Plenty of sports, I suppose."

"Oh, yas, plenty of 'em, and all kinds, too, from the shoe-string fellow who ain't got backbone enough to risk more than a quarter-on a bet up to the gilt-edged chap who thinks nothing of putting up a thousand cold dollars at a clip."

"Any games running in the town?"

"Plenty of 'em," the landlord responded.

"All sorts of games to accommodate all sorts of people."

"You see, during the racing meeting the city authorities git kinder blind, and they ain't very strict, so that almost anybody kin run a game, provided they ain't too loud about it."

"Of course it stands to reason that the authorities wouldn't let them go ahead with open doors, so t'nt anybody who walked the streets could see just what was going on. A man must conduct such things decently and in order."

"Sart'in, and that is what is wanted," the landlord assented.

"I inquired about this matter because I feel as if I would like a little amusement tonight and I should not mind trying my luck if I can run across a square game where a man will have a chance for his white alley," Blake explained.

"You have got the right idee," the landlord remarked, approvingly.

"Tain't no use for a man to go up ag'in a skin game whar he don't stand no show, nohow."

"That goes without saying, only a flat tries a thing of that sort."

"Wal, a man kin scare up about any kind of game right now in the town from a chuck-a-luck board up to a furst class faro bank."

"A big game is what I am after, for it is not wise for a man to waste his time on a little concern."

"As a rule the small affair cannot afford to run a square game, although the percentage is always so largely in favor of the bank."

"Sart'in! I reckon that you are right thar. I don't really know much 'bout them things myself, for I never fooled 'round any games."

"You are probably a good deal better off than if you bad," the sport admitted. "But I have kind of g'it into the habit of taking a flyer now and then, and when a man contracts a habit of that sort it is hard work to quit."

"I reckon that it is."

"Suppose you give me direction how to find one of the big games, and I will take a look at the 'tiger'"

"Tiger!" and the old man chuckled.

"Well, now, stranger, I reckon you have got the thing bout right, for from what I have heard of the beast I reckon he is a regular tiger and no mistake, claws and all! I judge, you see, from the way he skins most of the men who pay him a visit."

"That is the game," the sport observed with the air of a philosopher. "And if a man goes in to cut the tiger's claws, pull his teeth and strip him of his hide, he must not complain if the beast tries the operation on him."

"That is correct, by hookey!" the landlord assented.

Then he gave the directions which the sport required.

Blake set out, but after he started it suddenly occurred to him that the landlord's instructions were not as plain as they might be.

"I was to go three streets, then turn to the right, then go ten streets and turn to the left, then—well, I will be hanged if I know what the next directions were."

"Never mind, I will go on, and if I run across a hack I will be able to get the proper directions from the driver, for such men are usually well posted."

Blake went on for three streets, turned as directed, and walked until ten streets were passed, then, to his surprise, he found he was getting into the suburbs of the town, the houses beginning to get few and far between.

"Well, well, I must have made some mistake, or else the landlord did in giving me the directions."

"It isn't the first time that I have had a man say turn to the right when he meant left, and *vice versa*."

"But as long as I have come out of my way I will keep on to the end of the block, then take the cross street and return."

The night was rather a dark one, for although there was a young moon it did not give much light.

The sport too had now come to a part of the street, where on one side were only vacant lots, and on the other what had once been a prosperous manufactory, occupying the whole block.

But now the buildings which stood in the center of the plot were shut up, and about half the fence was either prostrated on the ground or had been carried off.

The street was badly lighted, so it was a particularly gloomy spot.

"If I was in some wild western town now I would expect to see some fellow jump at me from behind the shelter of this fence and proceed to 'hold me up' in the good old road-agent fashion," the sport murmured as he turned the corner.

Hardly had he finished the sentence when he was made to realize the truth of the old French adage, "it is the unexpected which always happens."

From behind the shelter of the dilapidated fence came a man with a mask on his face and a short, stubby derringer pistol in his hand.

The new-comer was about the medium height, stockily built, and dressed in a well-worn dark suit, with a soft felt hat pulled down over his eyes.

There was ample light for the sport to ascertain these facts, at a single glance.

"Throw up your hands!" cried the stranger in a gruff voice.

"Don't you attempt to move or I will put a bullet right through you."

"This here is a derringer I want you to understand, and carries an ounce ball!"

"You don't mean it?" the sport exclaimed, in a voice indicative of great amazement.

He had promptly elevated his hands above his head, and was staring at the footpad as though he esteemed him to be a rare curiosity.

The masked man was somewhat puzzled by the exclamation for this was not exactly what he expected to hear.

"Yes, I do mean it!" he growled. "And I want you to understand that there isn't any funny business about this thing, anyway!"

The masked man had got the idea that the sport spoke in a joking manner.

"Funny business!" the Fresh ejaculated.

"Well, I should smile!"

"Oh, no! I don't see anything funny about this proceeding."

"I don't think that it is a laughable matter to look into the mouth of a small cannon and realize that the aforesaid cannon is liable to go off at any moment with the chances that the ball would drill a hole in a man big enough to let a torchlight procession go through."

The masked man now resented his tone of levity.

"Say! this is business—strictly business, you know, and you want to be careful how you shoot off your mouth."

"Certainly! Why, you never struck a man more careful than I am since you were hatched!" the sport declared.

"I don't want any more of your chin-music!" the footpad exclaimed, angrily.

"You talk too much—you are too blamed fresh anyhow!"

The sport laughed and shook his head.

"There is an old saying which announces that what everybody says must be true, and as you are about the nine-hundredth man who has declared that I am too fresh I begin to believe that it must be so, and I suppose I ought to proceed to make arrangements to get myself salted as soon as possible."

"If you don't bush your jaw I will salt you and in a way you won't like!" the masked man exclaimed, angrily.

"Pardner, it is your say-so," the sport replied, pleasantly.

"Now then I want you to hand over your valuables as soon you can, for I am in a leetle hurry, and haven't got any time to waste."

"Yes, of course, under the circumstances there isn't anything for me to do except to comply with as good a grace as possible."

"You will have to allow me to take one arm down though, or else I will not be able to get at my wallet."

"That is all right, but don't try any gum-game, you know," the masked man warned.

"Don't attempt to pull any gun, for I have you covered, and if I caught you trying anything of that kind I would lay you out as dead as a door-nail, and do it as quick as a wink too!"

"That is all right!" the sport replied. "Do I look like a man fool enough to throw his life away for the sake of trying to save a few paltry dollars? No sir-ee, not much!"

"You have got me in a tight place and the only thing I can do is to grin and bear it."

"That is the way to talk!" the outlaw declared with an approving nod.

"When a man gets into a fix of this kind if he is sensible he gives up without making any trouble."

"That is just the kind of hairpin I am," the sport replied. "And if you will permit me to use my right hand I will get out my wallet at once. I am afraid though that you will be rather disappointed at the amount of lucre it contains."

"Ah, yes, that is a good game of yours but it will not work!" the masked man observed with a chuckle.

"I know all about you and I know that you are always in the habit of carrying a big wad of money with you."

The sport was considerably surprised by this statement.

"See here, pardner, it is evident to me that you have made some mistake," the Fresh responded.

"I am a stranger in this town and am anything but well-heeled for I have come here on purpose to pick up a stake at the races."

"Yes, yes, I know all about it!" the other exclaimed, impatiently.

"You are the man I want, all right, so hurry up and hand over your valuables!"

"Certainly!"

And with the word Blake produced his wallet, but as he drew it out he dropped his pen knife which he pulled out with the wallet.

"Hello! there goes my knife! I mustn't lose that," the sport remarked, and then he stooped to pick up the knife.

This movement threw the footpad off of his guard, and he lowered his pistol, prepared to take the wallet when the Fresh assumed an upright position again.

But the hand of the masked man was never destined to touch the coveted prize.

The Fresh was no greenhorn to be thus easily trapped, and he kept the footpad in conversation in order to get an opportunity to take him by surprise.

Blake was so cool and easy about the matter that the man was deceived into the belief that the sport had no intention of offering resistance, and so he was unprepared for an attack.

But as Blake rose from picking up the

knife, when his head got on a level with the middle of the masked man he gave a sudden jump and butted the footpad in the stomach with such terrific force that the breath was almost knocked out of him.

Over on his back went the masked man with a howl of pain.

The concussion forced the derringer from his hand so that he was disarmed.

When the footpad fell the sport was on top of him and his fingers immediately sought the throat of the masked man and soon he had him choked until he was almost insensible.

When the fellow commenced to gasp and gurgle the Fresh relaxed his grip and taking advantage of the helplessness of the other, took a handkerchief out of the man's pocket and tied his wrists securely together.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE TURFMAN.

AFTER thus rendering the man helpless the sport picked him up and carried him into an angle of the buildings, which stood in the center of the lot.

Then he placed him on the ground in a sitting position with his back against the wall, in the corner, took a seat upon the steps which led to the door of the building and waited for the man to revive.

The Fresh had taken care not only to pick up the derringer which had been forced from the hand of the highwayman but he had secured a mate to it which he had felt in the pocket of the masked man.

In a couple of minutes the fellow recovered from the effect of the choking operation.

He opened his eyes, looked around him in a bewildered way, and then when he caught sight of the Fresh, who was smiling at him as good-naturedly as possible, a knowledge of what had occurred suddenly came to him.

The look of bewilderment changed to a scowl of anger, and he gritted his teeth in rage.

This made the sport laugh, and the footpad cried:

"Durn yer! If I had had any idee that you were going to try a trick of this kind on me, I would have laid you out with a derringer-ball through your heart in the first place!"

"Ah, yes, but it is not possible for us short sighted mortals to foresee these little things," the sport rejoined.

"There is an old saying, you know, about what a great thing it would be for the human race in general if a man's foresight was only as great as his hindsight."

"Say, what do you mean by this here business?" the ruffian inquired, looking at the bandage which bound his wrists.

The mask which had covered his face had been torn off during the struggle, so the sport had a view of his countenance, and a low-browed, bulldog-jawed, sullen-faced fellow he was, too.

"Merely to keep you from getting into mischief," Blake answered.

"You see, I wanted to have a little talk with you about this matter, for I know that you made some mistake when you attacked me."

"I reckon not," the fellow growled.

"Oh, yes you have, for from the way in which you spoke it is plain that you expected to make a good stake out of me, and that shows that you must have had come knowledge of me in advance, for I know that there isn't anything about my appearance which would be apt to make a man think I was in the habit of carrying around much wealth."

"I ain't a-going to say a word!" the fellow declared in a dogged way.

"Really, are you going to be so unreasonable?" the Fresh exclaimed in a tone indicative of profound astonishment.

"Well, well, I wouldn't have believed it, for I took you to be a gentleman possessed of remarkably good sense, but I see that I have made a mistake."

Then the sound of a footfall came to the ears of Blake.

"Hello! there is somebody coming!" the sport exclaimed.

"Now there is a chance that this may be the party whom you were waiting for when you made the mistake of holding me up."

"I didn't make no mistake!" the footpad exclaimed.

"Ob, yes, you did. I know from the way in which you spoke that you were waiting for a man whom you knew to be in the habit of carrying a fat pocketbook with him, and as I am a total stranger in the town, it was not possible for you to know anything at all about me."

The sound of footsteps grew stronger and soon the form of a man loomed up in the gloom.

"Hello, stranger! step this way a moment, if you please."

The new-comer halted, and as the rays of the moon had strengthened a bit the Fresh was able to discern that he had drawn a revolver from his hip-pocket.

The stranger was a well-dressed gentleman, just about the same size of the Fresh, and wore a dark alpine hat similar to the one which Blake had.

"Don't be alarmed!" the sport exclaimed.

"Everything is all correct, but I have corralled a prisoner here, a fellow who tried the hold-up business on me and I need a little assistance."

There was something in the tones of Blake's voice which seemed to convince the stranger that it was not a snare, and so he came at once to the noo—where the sport had his prisoner.

The new-comer though took the precaution to carry his revolver in his hand so as to have it ready for action.

"I am in a rather ticklish position here," the Fresh explained when the stranger came up.

"Good deal like the man who caught the bear, you know, he had to hold on to the animal's tail, for he didn't dare to let go."

"I have captured the man all right, and now the question is what am I going to do with him?"

"Tried to hold you up, eh?" asked the stranger, surveying the scowling footpad with a deal of interest.

The new-comer was a man of forty-five or thereabouts, a typical South-Westerner, with the long oval face peculiar to the men of that section.

A jolly well-fed looking man who has the appearance of being one with whom the world had gone very well indeed.

"Yes, but I am satisfied that it was all a mistake," the Fresh exclaimed.

"From what the man said when he jumped out and accosted me I am satisfied that he was waiting for a fellow who carried a good big wallet with him."

"Oh, you don't think that he was waiting to hold up the first man who came along?" the stranger asked, evidently much interested.

"No, sir!" he had it in for one particular man, but I happened to come along first and so got the reception intended for another."

"Well, well, this is a very strange affair!" the Kentuckian declared.

"Perhaps the man was waiting for me."

"Are you well-heeled financially?" the Fresh inquired.

"Yes, I usually carry a thousand dollars or so," the other replied.

"I reckon then that you were the man this fellow was after," Blake remarked.

"Are you in the habit of coming this way after dark?" the sport inquired.

"No, no, very seldom, indeed, almost never I may say."

"You see I am a turfman, and my place where I keep my horses is out in this direction, but there isn't any business to take me out there after dark, but to-night I got word from my trainer that one of the horses was sick and he wished I would come out immediately."

"Oho! I begin to smell a mice!" the Fresh declared, his acuteness immediately aroused.

"I have no doubt you would be considerably astonished now to find out after you reached your stables that none of your horses were sick, and that the trainer had not sent you a message?"

"Yes, I would, indeed!" the turfman exclaimed.

"I would be willing to bet about two to one that things will turn out to be as I say."

"The message from your man was a decoy to get you out here so that this

beetle-browed rascal could have a chance to go for you."

The turfman looked astonished.

"Well, well, if this is so I have had a lucky escape," he remarked.

"Yes, it certainly appears so, although you might have been fortunate enough to get the best of the fellow as I did."

"You played a mean low-down trick on me!" the footpad exclaimed, angrily. "And I was a blamed fool to be caught so darned easy, but I will have to admit that you played the trick right up to the handle, and I don't believe there are ten men in the world who could have fooled me as nicely as you did."

"I reckon the man would have taken me into camp all right," the Kentuckian observed.

"And so I will have to consider myself your debtor."

"Don't allow that to worry you," the Fresh replied.

"It was just by accident that I happened to come along ahead of you, so it is Dame Fortune, who took it into her head to regulate the thing that you must thank and not I."

"That is all right, but I am much obliged to you all the same," the turfman rejoined.

"You need not allow the weight of the obligation to oppress your soul," Blake remarked.

"But I am wandering away from the point," the sport added.

"It is my idea that somebody put up a job to rob you, and as I am extremely curious by nature I am desirous of ascertaining all the particulars of the affair."

"Tain't no business of yours, nohow!" the footpad objected—in a sulky way.

"Yes, I am aware of that fact, but a little thing of that kind never troubles me, you see," the Fresh rejoined in his careless way.

"The less interest I have in the matter the more inclined I am to interfere, and as I have made up my mind to get at the bottom facts in this affair the quicker you make a clean breast of it the better."

"You won't get anything out of me!" the footpad responded in a dogged way.

"You are anxious then for me to hand you over to the police, and, mind you the charge which I will make against you is a mighty serious one. The Kentucky laws are very strict in regard to crimes of this kind so if I take the trouble to prosecute you—and you can bet all you are worth that I will do my best to put you through a course of sprouts—the chances are great that you get a sentence of at least ten years in the stone jug for this bit of business."

The prisoner's under-jaw fell and a look of alarm appeared on his face.

There was a certain something in the tones of the sport's voice which conveyed the idea that he would be as good as his word and the footpad became decidedly uneasy.

"If I cough the thing up will you let me go?" he asked.

"Yes, if you tell a straight-forward story so I can be satisfied it is the truth," the Fresh replied. "You are only a tool, I fancy, and I am anxious to get at the principal."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE REVELATION.

THE footpad pondered over the matter for a moment and then he looked at the turfman.

"Will this gent be willing to go in on a deal of this kind?" he added.

"Certainly!" the Kentuckian replied, immediately.

"It isn't any concern of mine. This gentleman is the man who did you up, and it is his privilege to make any arrangements he chooses about the master."

"Mebbe after I give the thing away you will give me up to the police?" the man said in a doubtful way.

"Don't you worry about that!" the Fresh exclaimed.

"You will get a square deal from me every time, for that is the kind of game I always play."

"It is no object to me, you know, to get you into a hole, provided you are willing to do what I want."

"As I have got the best of this little affair

I can afford to be generous, and so don't harbor any malice."

"I'll go you!" the footpad cried, coming to a sudden determination.

"Why should I hesitate to git out of this hyer scrape if I see a fair chance to do it?" he added.

"I reckon that the man who made the bar gain with me would give me the throw-down in a minute if he got into a hole himself."

"Oh, yes, there isn't much doubt about that," the sport replied.

"There is an old adage about honor among thieves, but men who know anything about the matter are well aware that it is all bosh, for nine out of every ten fellows when they get into a scrape are prompt enough to give the rest of the gang away if they think they can gain a point by so doing."

"I reckon you are right," the footpad admitted.

"Not a doubt about it!" the turfman exclaimed.

"When a man is in a hole he would be a fool not to try for to get out the best way he can," the fellow argued.

"Correct!" the Fresh declared. "Go ahead with your explanation and don't waste any more time."

"I ain't got much to tell, and I don't exactly understand the thing myself but, maybe, one of you two will be able to get the hang of it."

"Sail in and give us a chance to try!" the Fresh exclaimed.

"I am a stranger in this hyer town—came in last week with a drove of cattle from south Kentucky, and after I got paid off I thought I would hang on for awhile so as to see the sights."

"It is the first time that I was ever in Lexington, and though I reckoned I was able to hold my own with any gang in the country yet I run into a crowd who did me up brown," the fellow admitted with a rueful face.

"Cleaned you out, eh?" the sport observed.

"Yes, sir, and they did the job up in great shape too," the man responded.

"The fact is I reckon they rung in some drugged licker on me, for I will be hanged if I know how they got all my money away."

"Anyhow, when I woke up in the morning I found that I was completely cleaned out, and the man who kept the saloon pretended not to know anything about it."

"I had a room over the shebang, and the galoot said that I had come in about mid night as drunk as a briled owl, so he helped me up to bed, but there wasn't anybody with me, and he didn't know nothing 'bout anybody cleaning me out."

"Of course not!" Blake exclaimed. "A man who keeps a joint of that kind finds it convenient on certain occasions to be blind to all that goes on in his place."

"I had paid for my board for a week, so I concluded to hang out for a couple of days anyway."

"I was feeling mighty blue this afternoon when a well-dressed cove with a black beard came in."

"He kinder sized me up for a moment, then he went over and had a talk with the boss of the shanty, and I reckoned from the way they looked in my direction, that they were chinning about me."

"After a little while the fellows came over and axed me to have a drink. I was willing, of course. He set 'em up three times, and then he took me to one side and said the landlord had told him that I was playing in hard luck."

"I answered that I had run up ag'in' a brace game and got cleaned out."

"He said he was sorry, for, although I was a stranger to him, yet he always hated to hear of a man getting the worst of a thing of that kind."

"Astonishing interest for a stranger to take," the Fresh observed sarcastically.

"Of course he was up to some game," the footpad rejoined.

"I got right onto that, you know, in the beginning, but he didn't beat about the bush much, for he came right down to business."

"He said he knew a man who was in the habit of carrying about a thousand dollars in his wallet, and he could fix it so I could lay for him in a lonely place and collar the money without any trouble."

"Ah, yes, it was a nice little game, but where was this party to come in? Were you going to divide the money with him after the trick was taken?" the sport asked.

"No, he said he did not want any of the money and I could keep it all, but there was a check in the wallet—a canceled check, which wasn't of any value to anybody—and I must give that to him."

The Fresh had his eyes on the face of the Kentuckian while the foot-pad was giving the explanation, and so saw the grave look which came over the countenance of the gentleman.

"He made a mighty good bargain with you!" Blake declared.

"Well, that is all there is to it," the fellow said. "Now you know as much about the thing as I do, and as I have made a clean breast of it, I s'pose you are going to do the square thing by me."

But the man looked a little doubtful as he spoke, just as though he was afraid the sport would not keep his word.

"Oh, yes, I will give you a square deal every time!" the sport declared.

"Just one question though!"

"What is it?" the fellow asked.

"Where were you going to meet this man after the job was done?" Blake inquired.

"At the saloon where I first saw him," the man replied.

"Do you wish to ask him anything?" the Fresh inquired of the Kentuckian.

"No, nothing," the gentleman replied.

From the way in which he spoke Blake, who was an uncommonly shrewd observer, conjectured that he was considerably troubled by what he heard.

"Well, now that this little scheme of yours has failed what do you propose to do?" the sport asked of the foot-pad.

"Blame me if I know!" the fellow replied in a disconsolate way.

"If I had a few dollars I would light out for where I came from this very night."

"That is the very best thing that you can do!" the sport declared. "And as I am always the kind of a man willing to help a lame dog over a fence I will tell you what I will do."

"I have taken a fancy to this pair of old-fashioned pistols—these derringers which I took from you—and I will give you a five-dollar note for them."

"That will stake you sufficiently to enable you to get home."

"It's a go!" the fellow cried. "You jest give me the five dollars, and I will light out of this town so mighty durned fast that you will not be able to see my heels for dust."

Blake untied the man's hands and then gave him a five-dollar bill as he rose to his feet.

"Stranger, I am much obliged," the fellow declared.

"You are a white man, and no mistake. So-long! I will see you again some time, mebbe." And then he took his departure.

The other two watched him until his figure disappeared in the gloom.

Then the Fresh addressed his companion.

"Did this man's revelation give you any clue to the man who engineered this scheme?" he asked.

"Oh, yes and he is just the fellow to get up a game of this kind," the Kentuckian replied.

"Really, sir, you have done me a great service, for there isn't much doubt that if you had not captured this fellow he would have succeeded in robbing me, for I should have been so taken by surprise as to have been rendered incapable of escaping from the trap."

"The job was very neatly arranged; there isn't any doubt about that," the sport remarked with the air of a man who considered himself to be really an excellent judge of that sort of thing.

"I don't doubt that ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have been caught, but as it happens I have led a life of adventure for years, and so when I am suddenly called upon to confront a peril of this kind, my mind works with wonderful quickness, and I can usually devise some trick to enable me to get the best of my opponent."

"It is one of those cases, you understand, where it is necessary for a man to play the fox first and the lion afterward."

"I comprehend," the Kentuckian replied.

"I should have been caught in the trap undoubtedly, and now, although, thanks to the fortunate accident of your coming up the street in advance of me, I escaped the snare, yet the revelation which this fellow has made gave me cause for serious uneasiness."

"Perhaps I can be of assistance to you," the sport suggested.

"I am a deuce of a fellow for getting into scrapes and remarkably lucky also in getting out of them."

"I should not be surprised if you could aid me, and if you will walk up to my place with me I will explain the matter as we go along."

"I am a kind of an easy-going man and from the complexion which this affair has now assumed I am satisfied I am going to have trouble in handling the matter."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE FRESH VOLUNTEERS.

"I WILL be pleased to do all that I can to aid you," the Fresh remarked, as the two proceeded to the street.

"First I must explain who I am so you will understand the situation," the Kentuckian observed.

"My name is Benjamin Saturday, and I own a large stock-farm about twenty miles south of Lexington, where I make a specialty of breeding race horses."

"Ah, yes, I think I have seen your name in the newspapers, Major Ben Saturday," the Fresh declared.

"You have some horses entered in the Lexington meeting?"

"Yes, and that is why I am here."

"The races are also responsible for my presence in Lexington," the Fresh explained.

"My name is Jackson Blake, I am a sport, and happening by accident to become the owner of a race-horse, I am going to see if I can't make a living on the turf."

"I am afraid that you will find it a rocky road to travel unless you happen to strike a streak of luck," the Kentuckian remarked.

"I have been in the business ever since I was a boy, in fact got the breeding farm from my father who went into the business when he was a young man, but I reckon I could have put the same amount of money into almost any other kind of business and got better returns."

"There are some things about the turf too which are not as agreeable to a man like myself who pretends to be a gentleman."

"I suppose you refer to the number of scallawags who are connected with it, and with whom a turfman is obliged to come in contact more or less?"

"Yes, that is what I mean. A couple of years ago I was unfortunate enough to put a man named David Deacon in charge of my place as superintendent."

"He came highly recommended and I thought I had secured a valuable man, but inside of six months I made the discovery that he was a thorough-paced rascal, and I was obliged to get rid of him."

"Of course, the man has been my bitter enemy ever since, and he is just the sort of fellow to cause a great deal of trouble too."

"He is a gambler, and a desperado who boasts of the number of men whom he has killed."

"Only a deacon in name then," the Fresh observed, always ready to crack a joke.

"Ever since I was obliged to get rid of him the man has been on the look-out to do me an injury, and this fact has placed me in a very peculiar position."

"Although I am a turfman yet I am a church member and I flatter myself a tolerably consistent Christian, and so, naturally, I would hate like thunder to be drawn into a quarrel with this man."

"I understand, but such a fellow would be delighted to bring on an affray."

"Exactly! Of course, if I am attacked I will defend myself to the best of my ability, but I would rather avoid such a thing."

"Oh, yes, it isn't any reflection upon the courage of a man situated as you are to desire not to have anything to do with such a fellow."

"The man is an inveterate gambler and lately has been playing in very hard luck, so being hard pushed for money he has been unwise enough to commit forgery," the turfman explained.

"While he was in my employment he managed in some way to get hold of some of my blank-checks, and a couple of these checks he filled out for a hundred apiece, signing my name to them and dating them ahead."

"Then from a man who knew that Deacon had been in my employ, but was not aware there had been any trouble between us, he got a loan on the checks, giving as a reason why he wanted the accommodation that he did not care to ask the bank to cash the checks until they were due."

"A plausible excuse."

"Then too he said that he only needed the money for a week or so and would redeem the checks before they came due so he could present them to the bank himself."

"A cunning trick to prevent discovery," the Fresh observed.

"Yes, but just by accident the man who held the checks happened to have some business with me and casually mentioned the matter, so I learned all the particulars, and I immediately took up the checks, thinking that I would have such a hold on the man as would prevent him from troubling me in the future."

"I see; you intended to use the forged checks as a weapon if the man did not behave himself."

"Yes, that was my idea, and I wrote a letter to him explaining just how I felt about the matter."

"And his answer to the letter was, I presume, this attack on you."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Well, as far as I can see, you are in for a fight, and the only course open to you is to invoke the aid of the law as soon as possible."

"Yes, I am afraid I will have to do it, and I can assure you that I am extremely reluctant to take the step," the Kentuckian remarked with a gloomy shake of the head. "For there is no doubt that it will lead to a hostile meeting between us."

"Very likely."

"And that is just what I want to avoid, for I can assure you that I do not want to kill him and I have a decided objection to his killing me."

"Oh, yes, I can understand just how you feel about the matter," the Fresh remarked. And then one of the peculiar ideas for which the Fresh was noted suddenly came into his head.

"Major, a thought has occurred to me!" he exclaimed.

"I am a man just now who is in want of an occupation—ready for any chance to make an honest dollar; suppose then that you turn this matter over to me. Allow me to act as your proxy. If Mr. Deacon is anxious for a fight I will accommodate him, for I have been a wanderer in the Wild West for a number of years and have grown so used to warfare that it has become almost as natural for me to fight as to eat."

The Kentuckian surveyed the sport in considerable astonishment.

"Really now are you in earnest when you say that you have no objection to attending to this matter."

"Yes, I mean it—for a consideration, of course, for as my funds are at an extremely low ebb, just now, I must avail myself of every chance to make money," the Fresh replied, frankly.

"Well, I will be very glad indeed to have you take charge of the matter, for I am very much averse to having anything to do with the man at all."

"I will attend to the affair, and if nothing but war will satisfy the gentleman I will give him all the fight he wants," the sport declared.

By this time the pair had reached the major's place, and, as had been anticipated, no message had been sent to him.

After a brief stay the two departed, and as they proceeded to return to the center of the town the major explained to the Fresh where Dave Deacon could be found.

"I'll attend to him and if I do not make a success out of the job it will not cost you a cent!" the sport declared.

CHAPTER XXIV.

BEARDING THE GAMBLER.

JACKSON BLAKE, the redoubtable Fresh of Frisco, was one of those men who did not believe in allowing the grass to grow under his feet, as the saying goes, and so he immediately proceeded in search of Dave Deacon.

From the description which Major Saturday had given of the man the sport felt sure he would not have any difficulty in recognizing him as soon as he set eyes on his face.

The turfman's instructions were that Deacon could usually be found at a certain saloon near the Phenix Hotel.

In the rear of the saloon was a gambling den, and Deacon was accustomed to spend his spare time either in the saloon or in the rear room.

The sport found the place without any difficulty, and when he entered the saloon there was a goodly number of people there.

Blake had not thought out any particular plan of operation.

If the man whom he sought was inclined to be at all quarrelsome it would not be a difficult matter to draw him into a fight.

And as the sport reflected over the matter he could not help laughing to himself at the position which he had taken.

"It is like a leaf out of one of the old romances," he murmured.

"I am representing the soldier of fortune who goes around ready to sell his sword to the highest bidder, or the champion knight errant who made it his business to undertake the quarrels of the oppressed and the defenseless."

The sport ordered a glass of ale and then took a look around.

The man he sought was not in the saloon, so after Blake drank his ale he walked into the gambling room in the rear.

There was a faro game in full blast and at the table sat a big man with a black beard who exactly answered the description which the major had given.

"That is my man!" the sport muttered to himself as soon as he caught sight of the player's face.

There were eighteen or twenty men in the room, but only a few were playing, and the stakes were small.

The game had been going against the bank, and the dealer was a little annoyed.

"Really, gentlemen, I don't want to assume the responsibility of telling you how to play, but I will rise to remark that you are not putting up cash enough to make it worth any man's while to run a game," the dealer declared.

"Luck is with you, too," he continued. "All you need now, gentlemen, is a little sand, for the tide is running the right way, and if you have the pluck to hop in and back the game, you all stand a chance to win a small farm."

There was a general laugh at this sally, and the sport, never backward in coming forward, exclaimed, in his bright and airy way:

"Upon my word I don't see how any of you can resist the temptation to take a flyer when such a lay-out is presented to you; I am going in ten dollars' worth, anyway!"

Then Blake took a seat next to Deacon, and bought ten-dollars' worth of chips.

The game went on; Blake bet a few chips upon various cards, winning some bets and losing others, and then after awhile he took to "coppering" Deacon's bets.

That is, if Deacon bet that a certain card—say the queen—would win, the sport immediately wagered that the queen would lose.

As we have stated, up to the time when Blake made his appearance in the apartment, Deacon had been a winner.

His gains were not large, for he had played cautiously and for small stakes only, but with the advent of the Fresh at the table, his luck seemed to change, and he did not win one bet out of five.

And as the sport coppered his cards whenever Deacon lost, Blake won.

For about an hour this sort of thing went on, and then Deacon began to grow angry.

By this time he had lost all the money he had won from the bank and a hundred odd dollars besides.

"Curse the luck!" Deacon exclaimed, as

he drew out five ten-dollar bills and bought fifty dollars' worth of chips.

"Hang me if I ever saw it run so strongly in one direction. I haven't won a bet in the last half an hour."

"I have been more fortunate," the sport observed, "for I have hardly lost a bet in that time."

This speech annoyed Deacon excessively.

"Oh, yes, you have been mighty lucky!" he exclaimed angrily, turning, and facing the sport as he spoke.

"And I reckon that you have brought me bad luck, for until you sat down here and commenced to copper my bets I was getting along all right."

"You don't really believe that now, do you?" the sport inquired in a wondering tone.

"Yes, I do."

"Well, I am astonished, and I must say that a man who believes such a thing as that will believe almost anything."

"Do you mean to insult me?" cried Deacon in a rage.

"Oh, no, no insult about the matter," replied the sport coolly.

"I am not so sure about that," Deacon returned, for the cool way in which the sport spoke irritated him.

"Come, come, gentlemen, don't have any trouble," the dealer remarked, soothingly.

"I am sure, Mr. Deacon, that this stranger doesn't mean to offend you in any way, and you know well enough that it is a very common thing for one man to copper another one's bets."

"But it is devilishly annoying when a man persists in the pastime for a half an hour or so," Deacon declared.

"You take that view of it because I have been winning and you losing," Blake retorted.

"If the situation was altered, if you had won and I lost, I rather fancy that you would not have felt inclined to complain about the matter."

The Fresh made this observation in a rather sarcastic way and the bystanders smiled.

Deacon immediately became enraged.

"I want you to understand that I don't propose to stand any nonsense from you, and if you don't keep a civil tongue in your head I will find a way to make you."

Deacon rose to his feet as he spoke, evidently with the intention of making an attack on the sport.

Blake also rose, for in a game of this kind he was never caught napping.

The gamblers who ran the room immediately interposed between the two.

"Now, gentlemen, really you must not quarrel in here!" the "boss" cried. "That is something which I cannot allow."

"You certainly ought to understand that I cannot permit any disturbance to take place in here, for that would get us into trouble with the authorities at once, and the police would soon close us up."

"There is a nice back yard out in the rear though, surrounded by a high fence, and if you two gentlemen are anxious to pound each other you can go out there and hammer away to your hearts' content."

"There's a good moon which will afford you all the light necessary for the performance."

"I think I ought to give you a lesson for I can plainly see that you need one!" Deacon declared.

"Well, it may be possible that you will be able to pull off that little affair all right, but I can tell you it is my private opinion, publicly expressed, that if you try it on you will soon discover that you have bitten off more than you can chew," the Fresh retorted.

"What? Do you mean to say that you stand any chance with me?" Deacon blustered, drawing himself up to his full height.

Apparently he was a considerably bigger man than the sport, but in reality he was not, for although he was about half an inch taller, and looked to be far larger in build, yet he was loose jointed and clumsily put together, so that Blake was really the heavier man.

The sport was such a deceptive-looking fellow though, being so symmetrically built, that it took an excellent judge of mankind to detect that in reality he was in the heavy weight class, for the average man would

never have taken him to be more than a light weight.

"Stand any chance with you!" the sport exclaimed. "Well, I reckon I do, and it is my opinion that in about two minutes after the performance commences you will come to the conclusion that in tackling me you made the biggest mistake that you ever made in your life!"

"Come on out into the yard and give me a chance to take some of the conceit out of you!" Deacon exclaimed, angrily, for he got the idea, that the sport was trying to scare him.

"Go ahead! I am ready as soon as you are," the sport rejoined.

Deacon marched out of the rear door into the yard; Blake followed, and in the rear came all the rest.

Even the dealer deserted the game, leaving the table to the care of the colored servants, so great was the desire to witness the contest.

As the boss gambler had said the rear yard was a capital place for an encounter of this kind.

It was about twenty-five feet square, surrounded by a high board fence, perfectly level, and all there was in the way of the fighters were a few old boxes and barrels in one corner.

"Peel off your clothes!" exclaimed Deacon, arrogantly.

Then he set the sport an example by removing his coat and vest.

It did not take Blake long to get ready.

Then the two faced each other.

Deacon was not good enough judge of this sort of thing to understand that he was facing a man who had all the tricks of the prize ring at his fingers' ends, so to speak, so he made the mistake of attempting to "rush" his antagonist, thinking that his superior weight would enable him to beat down his opponent.

Soon was he made to realize what an error he had made.

As he rushed upon the sport, striking right and left as hard as he was able, Blake dodged and ducked, giving ground, and then the moment the other halted the sport attacked him with the ferocity of a tiger.

With his right hand he made a terrific lunge, apparently, at the head of his opponent.

This was only a ruse though for as Deacon, in a clumsy way, threw up both arms to ward off the stroke, thus leaving his body unguarded, the sport gave him a left-hander in the ribs, just over his heart which immediately doubled Deacon up like a jack-knife.

Over he went on his back, and his downfall brought forth a general exclamation of surprise from the lips of all the bystanders.

There were a number of "rounders" present, dyed-in-the-wool sports, who had seen some good fights in their time, but it was the universal opinion that none of them had ever seen a more effective blow delivered.

For a moment it looked as though Deacon had been completely knocked out.

CHAPTER XXV.

MORE TROUBLE.

THE Fresh folded his arms across his breast and waited for his opponent to rise.

"We did not make any arrangement in regard to the rules under which the contest was to be fought," the sport remarked.

"But if it was to be according to the Marquis of Queensberry's rules then it is your duty to get up within ten seconds so I can get another chance at you, for a round must last three minutes."

"I don't know anything about such rules," Deacon declared in a voice hoarse with rage. "I am not a regular prize-fighter."

"It would be a good thing for you in this game if you were," the Fresh retorted.

This rejoinder brought a smile to the lips of the spectators, for one and all thought it was the truth very aptly put.

"But you need not hurry yourself," the Fresh continued.

"Take all the time you like, rules or no rules. It does not make any difference to me, for there isn't any doubt in my mind that I can give you a solid, substantial thrashing, no matter what kind of a game you elect to play."

"You are a boasting braggart!" Deacon exclaimed, angrily.

"By dumb luck you managed to get in a good blow, but you can't do it again."

As he spoke the enraged gambler rose slowly to his feet.

"Is that your opinion?" the Fresh asked in a surprised tone.

"Yes, it is!"

"Well, then it goes to show you that you do not know much about the game for if you did you would understand now, after the experience which you have had, that when you tackle me you run up against a first-class man and you don't really stand much more chance to hold your own with me than a game cock does with an eagle."

The spectators looked at each other in some surprise when this decided declaration fell upon their ears, and a few of them thought the sport was inclined to over-rate his abilities, but the old sporting-men in the throng nodded their heads sagely as much as to imply that they were of the opinion the speaker was correct in his statement.

"I will soon give you a chance to make that boast good!" Deacon exclaimed, squaring off at the sport.

"I'm your man!" the Fresh replied.

And then he sailed into his opponent with all the fury of a lunatic.

Deacon was forced to give ground, and it taxed all his strength and agility to parry the storm of blows which the sport fairly rained upon him.

And yet the strokes were mere "parades," to borrow a term from the fencing school.

They were not intended to do any particular damage, only to confuse and tire out the man at whom they were aimed.

Deacon was forced back to within six feet of the fence, and then Blake halted.

The gambler, thinking the attack was over, drew a long breath and relaxed his guard.

Quick was the sport to take advantage of the opening.

Out shot his powerful right arm and the blow catching Deacon right between the eyes floored him as if he had been knocked down by an earthquake.

The spectators yelled.

There could not be any mistake about the matter this time.

This wasn't any chance blow, but a carefully planned and calculated stroke delivered by a man who was a past-master in the art of boxing.

The proprietor of the saloon protested vigorously against the yelling.

"You must be quiet, gentlemen!" he declared. "If you are going to yell like that you will have all the police in the city about our ears. You must not kick up a disturbance or else this scrap will have to be stopped."

The spectators calmed down at once for they all understood that the proprietor was correct in warning them.

This time Deacon was not as prompt in coming to the scratch as before.

He was apparently dazed by the blow; after falling he had rolled over on his side and lay motionless, but when some of the bystanders bent over him they saw that he was not completely insensible.

"I reckon this would be a knock-out and no mistake if you were running the thing under regular rules," one of the old sporting men observed.

"Give him all the time he wants," the Fresh observed.

"I am not in any hurry. He is after satisfaction and it will not be my fault if he doesn't get it to his heart's content."

The bystanders grinned.

It was their opinion that if the gambler knew when he was well off he would be content now to cry quits.

It was fully a couple of minutes before Deacon rose to his feet, and a sight indeed he presented when he did get up.

The blow in the face had given him two black eyes which decidedly did not improve his appearance.

"You are a devil of a boxer!" Deacon declared in a sulky way as he surveyed the sport with the air of a man who was greatly puzzled.

"Yes, I know a thing or two in that line," Blake replied.

"Are you a professional pugilist?" the gambler asked.

"Oh, no, I make no claims to being a professional; merely an amateur."

"Well, you can hit hard enough to be a professional," Deacon commented.

"A man like myself hasn't any business with you."

"That is just what I told you, but you jumped to the conclusion that I was bragging and wouldn't have it."

"You are an infernal scoundrel any way!" the gambler cried abruptly, and then he drew his revolver.

But Deacon was not smart enough to catch such a man as the Fresh of Frisco napping.

Blake had kept close watch on the eyes of his opponent, and the glitter which he saw in the orbs of the other warned him of danger before the movement was made.

The sport's revolver was out before the gambler could get his weapon ready, and so Blake was able to anticipate the discharge of Deacon's pistol.

His pistol was fired a second before the crack of the gambler's weapon rung on the air.

A snap-shot apparently, but those readers who have followed the fortunes of Jackson Blake, the renowned Fresh of Frisco, know full well that he was one of the best pistol-shots that the Pacific Slope, the home of expert marksmen, had ever seen, and it was not necessary for him to dwell on his aim.

As the reader understands, the sport had a certain purpose in view when he sought the gambler, Dave Deacon.

He intended to put a stop to that bully brow-beating men who hesitated to measure weapons with a notorious fire-eater.

And now that the chance had come in his way for which he sought, he improved it as quickly as possible.

It was his aim to disable Deacon and put an end to his career as a fighting man.

So he aimed at his arm, and so good a marksman was he that the bullet entered at the right wrist just as Deacon leveled his revolver to fire, ran up the arm and then glanced off into his breast.

The shock of the wound destroyed the gambler's aim, and his bullet whistled harmlessly in the air, high over the head of the sport.

With a hollow moan of pain, Deacon sunk to the ground.

The spectators looked at each other in alarm.

"Better scoot, gentlemen, before the police come," the proprietor advised.

The advice came too late.

The police were already in the saloon.

The yell which the spectators had given at Deacon's downfall had reached the ears of the policeman, and he, anticipating that something unusual was taking place, had promptly summoned the reserve force.

Blake was the coolest man in the assemblage.

To the captain in charge of the force he explained what had taken place, claiming that he had been attacked, and had acted strictly in self-defense.

He was, of course, placed under arrest and carried off to jail.

It did not take long for the news to travel through the city.

The major was prompt in coming to the jail.

"Don't fear; you shall have the best of counsel, and money will be spent like water to get you off!" the turfman declared.

On the next day the examination took place.

There were plenty of witnesses to show that the wounded man began the quarrel, and had his weapon out ready to fire when the sport shot him.

"A clear case of self-defense, your Honor!" the counsel for the prisoner declared.

"Yes, the evidence seems to show it," the judge remarked.

"Of course I still have to hold the prisoner for an examination.

"I shall not oppose the motion, your Honor," the legal gentleman replied. "For upon the evidence presented in the case it is plain that the wounded man was the assailant, and if he was severely wounded he has no one to blame for his hurts but himself, for if he had not attacked Mr. Blake he would not have been injured, and the law holds that a man is justified in defending himself to the best of his ability when he is assailed."

There was a hum of applause in the court-room when the district attorney finished his speech.

Many of the auditors had witnessed the fight and almost all of them believed that the bullying gambler had only received a lesson which he richly deserved.

The district attorney had been among the spectators, and so knew all the particulars of the affair.

Then too in this case there were wheels within wheels as the saying is.

Some of the friends of the district attorney had been fleeced by the black-bearded Deacon, and the official was glad to be able to get a chance to give the gambler a dig.

"I will go bail, your Honor, for the gentleman to any reasonable amount," Major Saturday declared.

The turfman and the judge were old acquaintances and so the official knew the major to be a responsible man.

It did not take long to go through the formality of making out the bail-bonds and then the Fresh was released.

Blake received a regular ovation upon leaving the court-room, and it was with difficulty that he got away from his new-made friends.

Major Saturday was so delighted with the way in which the sport had conducted the affair that he insisted upon Blake's dining with him.

The two went to the crack restaurant of the town and the major ordered a most excellent dinner to which the pair did ample justice.

"Really I fell very deeply indebted to you for the admirable way in which you have managed this matter," the turfman declared.

"Well, I think I have managed to make a success out of it, for it is not likely that the man will ever attempt to trouble you, or anybody else again; his fighting days are over, unless he learns to shoot with his left hand and that is not likely," Blake remarked.

"If he was not such an infamous scoundrel I might be inclined to be sorry for him, but as it is I cannot be," the turfman observed reflectively.

"Yes, it is the old biblical idea over again: 'As a man sows so shall he reap,'" the sport remarked.

"And now that the affair is settled the question of your compensation comes up. How much shall I pay you for this service?"

"Well, really, I don't know what to say about the matter. It is the first time in my career that I ever hired myself out as a fighting man and I don't really know what price to ask," the sport responded.

"I suppose a hundred or two would be about right: what do you think?"

"If you are satisfied with two hundred I will be glad to pay it, although, really, it seems to me as if you ought to have more," the turfman responded.

"Oh, no, two hundred is enough, and if I could make the same amount as easily every day of my life I would be satisfied."

The major counted out the money and then passed it across the table to the sport.

"There it is and if I can at any time be of service to you I will be glad to be able to oblige you."

The Fresh responded in suitable terms, and then he inquired of the major in regard to the various gaming-houses in the city.

"Do you have an idea of seeing what the tiger is made of?" the turfman asked, somewhat surprised.

"Yes, once in a while I take a little flyer in that way."

"Well, strange as it may appear to you I never ventured a dollar at a game of chance in my life, and from what little I know of the matter I should be inclined to believe that the odds are so much in favor of the game the players do not stand any chance at all."

CHAPTER XXVI. IN THE TIGER'S DEN.

"UNDER the circumstances of the case I should not hesitate to allow the accused to give bail," the judge declared, with a questioning glance at the district attorney as he spoke.

"It is not quite so bad as that if the game is a square one," the sport replied.

"The odds are heavily in favor of the bank, as they always are in all games of this kind, but once in a while a man has a run of luck which will enable him to beat the bank despite the odds."

"Yes, I have heard of such things," and then the major, who was well posted in regard to the city, gave the sport the information he desired.

The two parted with mutual expressions of regard.

Blake proceeded to his hotel and remained there until it was time for the evening train to arrive on which he expected Belle Hawkins.

The girl was on the train and was evidently heartily glad to see the sport again.

Blake had found a nice, quiet boarding-house in the neighborhood of the depot, and had made arrangements with the widow lady who kept the house to receive the girl, so he immediately conducted her to the place.

Then, after a conversation with Belle in regard to the probabilities of her getting work the sport departed.

He proceeded to the main street of the city, dropped into the hotels and leading saloons, and as he was soon recognized as the hero of the "shooting-match," he had no difficulty in finding plenty of people anxious to be agreeable to him.

The races were only two days off so the town was well filled with sporting men of all quarters and degrees, and each and every man was chuck-full of all sorts of information in regard to the meeting.

Many were the secret "tips" which the Fresh received from his new-made friends to be sure to back this or that horse for it was an "air-tight cinch" and the beast couldn't lose.

The evening passed rapidly away, and when the hands of the clock pointed to the hour of eleven Blake concluded that it was time he was on his way to the gaming-house.

He was eager to see what luck Dame Fortune had in store for him.

Happening to mention his idea to the two racing-men with whom he was conversing, the pair volunteered to accompany him.

The gambling-house was only about five minutes' walk from the hotel and the two were soon at the door.

"I don't know whether we will be able to get in or not," the Fresh observed as he rang the bell. "For I am a stranger and unless the porter is acquainted with one of you two gentlemen we may have trouble in gaining admittance if they are at all inclined to be particular."

"I do not think there is any cause for uneasiness on that point," one of the racing-men observed. "Just about the time of the meetings the local authorities are conveniently blind, and the sports anyhow do not have to be careful how they run their games, as in the more strait-laced northern cities."

This statement was correct, for after the door opened the gigantic negro who had charge of the portal surveyed the three for a moment and then apparently being satisfied with his scrutiny asked:

"What is it, gemmen?"

"We are in search of a little amusement to aid us to pass the time away," Blake explained. "And we were informed that in this mansion we would be apt to find what we want."

"Yes, sah," the negro responded with a grin which displayed all his ivories.

"Walk right in, sahs; glad to see you, gemmen; go right up de stairs."

The three proceeded according to the instructions, and soon found themselves in a gambling house fitted up in good style.

There were a couple of dozen gentlemen in the place and a game of faro was in progress.

Some acquaintances of the racing-men were present and greeted them, so the three soon felt at home.

"There was a big game running for there were a half a dozen of the prominent horse and cattle men of central Kentucky present and they were betting largely."

These men were so wealthy that the loss of a few thousand dollars at faro was a mere nothing to them.

Blake was an old sport, and there wasn't anything about the game which he did not understand as well as any professional

gambler who ever slipped a card out of a dealing-box, so after watching the game for a few minutes he became convinced that it was not being run on the square.

Only one of the racing-men was with him now, the other having gone off with some friends.

To this man, Colonel John Buckhannon by name, the sport had taken a liking.

He was a hearty, whole-souled fellow and Blake felt sure he could be trusted.

To Buckhannon then the sport confided his suspicions.

"What?" exclaimed the Kentuckian in surprise. "You don't mean to say you suspect that they ain't running a square game?"

"That is just what I think."

"But I have always heard it given out that they made it a rule here to run the squarest kind of a game."

"I can't help that," Blake responded. "I have seen a good many games run in my time, and I think I am something of a judge, and in this case I am free to confess that if the man is running a square game then he is acting in an extremely queer way."

"Well, I don't pretend to be much of a judge of this sort of thing, anyway," the horseman admitted.

"Once in a while I risk a few dollars, when I happen to be particularly flush, and feel as if luck was coming my way, but I don't play often enough to get well-posted in regard to the game."

"I have spent many a night at the green table," Blake observed. "And I flatter myself there are very few tricks about the game which I am not up to, so I am satisfied the thing is not run on the square."

"It is mighty strange," the Kentuckian observed, in a reflective way.

"The man who runs this place, Doc Thibideau, bears the reputation of being one of the squarest fellows in the business."

"That is the boss now dealing, the gentleman with the black mustache. He is a Creole from New Orleans, a very fine gentleman indeed, although he has the reputation of being considerable of a fire-eater—a great duelist, you know."

"Ah, yes, I see," Blake responded, and he surveyed the boss gambler with considerable curiosity.

Doc Thibideau was a man of forty or thereabouts, a polished, courtly gentleman apparently, with a resolute face and the bearing of one accustomed to mix in the best society.

"I am really greatly astonished to hear you say that you suspicion there is something crooked about the game," the horseman observed.

"It wasn't until this man sat down to deal that I noticed anything queer," Blake explained.

"Hav'n't you noticed how the tide of luck has been running steadily against the bank since we came in—and for some time before, judging from the number of chips that some of the players have?"

"Yes, it does look as if the boys were getting an inning to-night."

"That jolly, red-faced old gentleman is betting largely," Blake remarked, "and you can see by his pile of chips that he is well ahead of the bank."

"That is Judge Jackson, one of the biggest horse-breeders in Kentucky, or in the United States either for that matter," the colonel explained.

"He is a millionaire, too," the horseman added. "And I have heard it said that when he gets a-going he is one of the most reckless gamblers who ever risked a dollar on a green cloth."

"Just the sort of a man to go into a duel at cards, a sort of fight to the death."

"Yes, exactly."

"That, I reckon, is what the boss gambler is afraid of, and in order to prevent the old gentleman from breaking the bank, he has taken the dealer's place."

"You have got that about right to my notion," the horseman replied.

"I should judge that the old gentleman is about ten thousand dollars ahead of the game now, and if he keeps on betting a thousand dollars at a time, the odds are big that he will break the bank unless his luck changes."

"Oh, the old man is a plunger when he gets a-going," the colonel declared.

"The boss gambler is not going to allow his bank to be broken if he can possibly help it, so if fortune continues to favor the players, he is going to try and see what nimble fingers and a dexterous management of the cards will do to retrieve his fortunes," Blake remarked.

"Maybe you are right," the colonel assented. "But I am not smart enough to catch on to it."

CHAPTER XXVII.

A DUEL AT CARDS.

BLAKE watched the game for about ten minutes.

It proceeded with varying fortunes, sometimes the players and sometimes the bank won.

The sport calculated closely, and it was his opinion that the bank was a little ahead.

"I think the time is ripe for me to take a flyer in the game," he confided to the horseman.

"The play is a leetle too heavy for me this evening, and so I think I will stay out," the colonel replied.

Blake purchased a hundred dollars' worth of chips.

He had determined upon his course of action.

The sport had closely watched the play of the old judge, and came to the conclusion that the horseman, flushed with his success, had determined upon entering upon a duel at cards, with the idea of breaking the bank.

When a man starts in on a play of this kind he soon succeeds in concentrating the attention of those in the room upon him, for the size of his bets excites general wonder.

Briefly the sport explained his game to the horseman, after he had coppered the king to lose, venturing fifty dollars.

The judge had placed a thousand dollars on the king to win.

"The idea upon which I am working is as simple as simple can be," the Fresh said in the colonel's ear.

"If there is any crooked business about the game, then the dealer will manipulate the cards so that the judge will lose, for he has bet double the money of all the other players combined."

"That is why I have backed the king to lose, and I shall continue to bet against him off and on."

"It would not be wise for me to do so right straight along, for then the attention of the dealer would be called to my play, and it is my game not to allow him to suspect that I think there is anything wrong."

"I see," the colonel remarked with an approving nod. "And I must say that it seems to me as if you had laid out a mighty good scheme."

The horseman was right in this conjecture, as events soon proved.

The king lost, the judge's stake was swept away, but the sport won.

"Well, the king has gone back on me!" the old judge exclaimed. "And I must say that I consider it rather unhandsome treatment on the part of his majesty."

"Still, there may be some mistake about the matter, for mistakes will happen in the best regulated families, and so I will try the old man again."

"That is right—never say die, judge!" the boss gambler remarked.

"I will risk three thousand on his royal highness this time!" the judge declared, placing the chips on the card as he spoke.

"There's nothing like a man backing his game in good style," Doc Thibideau observed.

"That is my gait, every time!" the old horseman declared.

"As the old saying goes, there isn't any use of being a feller unless you are a devil of a feller!" And then the judge laughed in his hearty, whole-souled way.

Blake had removed his chips from the king, but at the last moment just as the deal was about to begin he put a hundred and fifty dollars' worth on the card setting that it would lose.

And lose it did right speedily for the king came out on the wrong side in the first six cards.

"Wow, wow!" exclaimed the judge as he watched the bank draw away his chips.

"This is what I call bloody murder now!"

"But I am game, and I will try another hack at the king although he has treated me so badly."

"What is the limit of the game, Doc?"

"No limit, judge," the boss gambler replied with courtly politeness.

"Then game is wide open and I am willing to deal for all that you care to bet."

"That is the kind of talk that I like to hear, and it shows that you have plenty of sand, Doc!" the old horseman declared.

"It takes sand to run a game of this kind, judge, and if a man hasn't got a goodly quantity of it he will not last long in a business of this kind," the gambler replied.

"That is a fact I reckon," the judge asserted.

Then the gambler noticed that Blake had allowed his chips to remain on the king and while the judge was getting more chips—he took five thousand dollars' worth this time—he called the sport's attention to the fact.

"Do you want your chips to remain on the card?" Doc Thibideau asked.

"Yes, I think I will risk it, for although the king has lost twice already it is my idea that he will not come up a winner on this third heat," the sport remarked.

"I don't agree with you, stranger," the old judge declared. "And I am going to put five thousand dollars on the king to win, for it don't seem possible to me that the king will lose three times in succession."

By this time about all the betting had stopped. The players had become so interested in the duel at cards going on between the old judge and the bank that they neglected to play.

And this is always the case in a duel of this kind.

The deal proceeded.

Blake watched the gambler with the eyes of a hawk, for he felt well satisfied that if the man was running a crooked game he would manipulate the cards so the king would lose, for by so doing he would win the judge's five thousand dollars, and only lose the six hundred to him.

A man would be stupid indeed not to be willing to give up six hundred to gain five thousand.

And as the Fresh expected Doc Thibideau could not resist the temptation to try a little hanky-panky business.

The king came out a loser, and although the boss gambler did the trick in first class style, no one in the room, with the exception of the sport, having any suspicion that all was not fair and above-board, yet Blake's eyes were keen enough to detect how the thing was done.

"Well, well, if this don't beat my time!" the old judge ejaculated.

"B'gosh! I am game though and I will have another hack at that blamed old king if I die for it!"

Then he proceeded to examine his pockets.

"Hello! I am about cleaned out!" he announced.

"Bring me a piece of paper and pen and ink. I will write you a check for ten thousand dollars and slap the hull durned business on the king."

"I s'pose you will not mind taking my check for ten thousand, Doc?" the old judge asked.

"Certainly not!" the boss gambler responded promptly. "Nor for twenty or fifty thousand either, for I know that you are a dead game sport, and not the kind of man to go back on your signature."

"No, sir-ee, not much! And you can be all you are worth on that too!" the old horseman declared with a great deal of pride.

Then he wrote out a check for ten thousand dollars and received chips to that value.

"Down she goes, the hull caboodle on the king to win!" the judge declared as he stacked the chips on the card.

"And if that royal son-of-a-gun goes back on me this time, I reckon I will never more have anything to do with him."

"Yes, sir, I will shake the hull darned royal crowd for good an' all."

"Mortal man couldn't blame you, judge," the boss gambler assented.

Blake had drawn his chips from the card but now, just as Doc Thibideau prepared to go on with the deal, he placed all of his chips on the king.

"I believe that you are right this time, sir," the Fresh said with a courtly bow to the old judge.

"I think the king will come up a winner this time and so I will risk my little pile on him."

"That is right—the more, the merrier!" the judge declared.

The boss gambler cast an inquiring eye around that table.

"Are you all through, gentlemen—all bets made?" he asked.

"I reckon they are, Doc, so you can let her go Gallagher as soon as you like!" the judge exclaimed.

"You mustn't mind my hurrying you up a bit for I am naturally anxious to get a chance to skin you out of ten thousand dollars."

"That is all right," the boss gambler replied with a good-natured smile.

"If you can win the money I will be glad enough to pay it."

"Mr. Dealer, before you go ahead with the game will you allow me to ask you a question?" the sport said, abruptly.

General surprise was excited by this speech and all eyes were turned on the Fresh.

"Yes, certainly, of course," the boss gambler replied.

"And I hope you will not take offense either," Blake continued.

"Offense!" Doc Thibideau exclaimed in a tone which expressed considerable surprise.

All within the room now had their eyes fixed intently upon the sport, for none in the apartment had any idea of what was coming, and they all were anxious to know what the sport meant.

"Yes, that is what I said. I am going to make a request of you, and I trust you will not take offense," the Fresh remarked.

The sport spoke in a civil, quiet way enough, but there was a certain something in his voice which warned the boss gambler, an old and experienced man of the world, that there was danger ahead.

"Well, I will try not to take offense, for I am generally a tolerably patient man, but I hope you will not say anything calculated to provoke me," Doc Thibideau remarked.

"It is rather difficult for a man to form an opinion in regard to a matter of that kind," the Fresh observed. "But I have got to speak, so I will go ahead anyway. There is considerable money up on this game and I want a square deal."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE FRESH SHOWS FIGHT.

THE pale face of the boss gambler flushed to the temples, and it was only by a violent effort that he restrained his anger.

For a moment it seemed as if about every man in the room was holding his breath, anticipating a violent outbreak, and a dead silence reigned.

The cold, pitiless eyes of the gambler glared at the sport, but the Fresh was not the sort of man who could be scared by a look, and he returned the glance with interest.

Then the boss gambler broke the oppressive silence.

"I am not astonished that you took the precaution to ask me in advance not to take offense, for what you have said is most offensive indeed, and if I wasn't one of the quietest men in the world I certainly would have been apt to make a hot reply," Doc Thibideau remarked, speaking with forced calmness.

"You are a stranger to me, and I don't think that I ever had the pleasure of seeing you before, and so it is possible that you do not know what kind of a man I am," he added.

"That is true, I will have to admit that I do not know anything about you," the sport remarked.

"Well, sir, if you will take the trouble to inquire, I think you will find that I bear the reputation of being as square a sporting man as you can scare up in the country," Doc Thibideau declared.

"That may be," Blake replied. "As I said before, I don't know anything about you, good, bad or indifferent."

"But this I do know, there is considerable

money on the table, and as I have a stake in the game, I want a fair deal."

"You have not got anywhere near the amount of money which this gentleman has staked," and the dealer nodded to the old judge. "and I have not heard him say anything to indicate he has any fears that he is not going to get a square show for his cash."

"Oh, I reckon that everything will be all right," the old judge observed.

"Maybe it is," Blake remarked in his careless way. "I can assure you that I hope everything is just as it ought to be, but as this is a very uncertain world, I did not think it would do any harm for me to explain to you just how I thought the game ought to be run."

"And then in regard to the point that this gentleman"—and he nodded to the judge—"has got more money on the table than I have wagered, I must rise to remark that I don't see that that fact makes any difference.

"If I had only a single dollar up on the game I am entitled to a square deal, and I would be the biggest kind of a fool if I didn't try my best to get a show for my money."

"Oh, yes, that is all very true," the boss gambler assented.

"I must admit that whether a man has bet much or little, he ought to have a square show, and I can assure you, sir, that that is just what I have the reputation of giving."

"It may seem strange to you, too, but I can say that this is the first time since I opened up my shop in this city that anybody ever said a word in regard to how I ran my game, and I don't mind saying right out that I don't like it."

"Oh, yes, I can understand that it is not pleasant to a man to have any doubts cast upon his play, but that sort of thing will happen once in a while," the sport retorted.

"I don't believe you would like it yourself if you were situated as I am," Doc Thibideau declared.

"But I suppose the idea is that you are not used to this sort of thing," the boss gambler continued. "And you got the idea in your head that it would be a smart thing for you to insinuate that everything wasn't all right."

There was a decided sneer in the gambler's tone and on his face as he spoke.

"It is the old idea, fools rush in where angels fear to tread," Doc Thibideau added.

"Oh, no, you are away out there!" the Fresh declared.

"I am an old hand at this sort of game for I have played faro clear from New York to the Pacific Slope."

"In fact, I am half a professional for I have dealt many a game in my time, and I greatly doubt if you can scare anybody up who knows much more about the game than I do."

A scowl darkened Doc Thibideau's face as he listened to the explanation.

"Oh, you are a regular old rounder!" the boss gambler exclaimed with a very decided sneer.

"Yes, you have hit it!" the sport replied. "I am onto all the curves of the games and the man who can put up any job on me has got to rise extremely early in the morning."

"I hope that you don't think that I would do anything of the kind?" Doc Thibideau exclaimed with an attempt to put on an air of injured innocence.

"White men are very uncertain," the sport replied. "And therefore I would hate to set up as a prophet, as I object to predicting what men will or will not do."

"But one thing is sure and that is that when I go into a game of this kind I mean to get a fair show for my money or know the reason why."

"Do you dare to assert that I would cheat if I got an opportunity?" the gambler exclaimed, angrily, the color again flushing up in his face.

"That is a question which I would rather not answer just at present," Blake replied.

"But I will say that I have made up my mind that you shall give me a square deal this heat or else there will be trouble!"

"Do you dare to threaten me?" and the dealer thrust his right hand under the table.

The Fresh understood what this meant well enough.

Under the table was a shelf; on that shelf was a cocked revolver, kept there so as to be in readiness for just such emergencies as this, and when the faro-dealer thrust his hand under the table it was to grasp the revolver.

On all such occasions as this the Fresh was always quick to take action.

He anticipated that the boss gambler would make such a move, and so he was on the watch for it.

Therefore he was not at all taken by surprise.

Blake was on his feet in an instant

In his hands he held the derringers which he had taken from the footpad.

The hammers of the pistols were up, and both were leveled full at the breast of Doc Thibideau.

"Don't attempt to draw your weapon or you are a dead man!" the sport cried.

There was a tableau of amazement.

The gambler glared at the sport while the spectators surveyed the scene in speechless wonder.

Doc Thibideau was in a trap, though, and he had sense enough to understand that the sport meant business.

It was not the first time that he had seen derringers carrying an ounce ball, and he comprehended that if one of them ever struck him the chances were about a thousand to one that his account with the world would be abruptly closed.

It did not take the wily old gambler long to decide what he had best do.

It was a situation which the old saying fitted exactly: "When the lion's skin falls short eke it out with the fox's."

The lion's skin was short; open force was not to be thought of for a moment as the sport had secured such an advantage that he could not hope to contend with him.

The boss gambler then hastened to withdraw his hand from under the table.

"Don't be too hasty, my friend," he remarked, trying to be extremely polite.

"You have misunderstood my meaning; I have no idea of using any violence, I assure you, so have the kindness to put up your pop-guns and resume your seat."

"Certainly, of course!" the Fresh exclaimed. "I am the last man in the world to want to get into trouble, although I have always had the reputation of being able to look out for myself, but for all that I would rather keep out of a quarrel than get into one."

Then the sport pocketed his pistols and resumed his seat.

All within the room breathed more freely for it had been the opinion when Blake produced his pistols that there would be a bloody battle between him and Doc Thibideau.

The boss gambler bore the reputation of being a desperate man and this was the first time that anyone had ever succeeded in getting the best of him in a game of this kind.

Doc Thibideau was furiously angry, but he did his best to conceal his feelings.

The tide was running against him and he was at a loss to see how he could get the best of the strange sport at present.

He had been playing a crooked game, for early in the evening he had realized that fortune was against him, and when the old judge commenced to make his big bets he understood that if he did not change the current of luck by cheating, the chances were great that the old horseman with his reckless betting would break the bank.

He was such a skillful player that he did not believe any one present could detect that he was ringing a cold deal.

And if Blake had not been an expert, equal to almost any professional, the trick would not have been detected.

The jig was up now, though, for after Blake's warning, he did not dare to try any more tricks.

The game proceeded, and inside of five minutes the king came out a winner.

It was as much as the old gambler could do to keep his temper as he looked upon the painted pasteboard.

"Gentlemen, I reckon I will have to close up for to-night," Doc Thibideau said, endeavoring to force a smile.

"The game is about twenty-five thousand dollars out, and as I haven't got a national bank or the United States Treasury behind me, I will have to suspend to repair damages."

"We will be open to-morrow night, though, gentlemen, and I will be pleased to see you all, and I will do my best to treat you right."

"Now, if you will all take a parting drink with me, I will be much obliged."

All accepted the invitation with alacrity.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE GAMBLER DEMANDS SATISFACTION.

"You are dead game, Doc, anyway," the old judge declared, after the liquor was drank. "And the next time I feel like a little fun, I will come over and give you another rattle."

"All right, judge, I will be glad to see you," the boss gambler replied.

Then the guests departed.

The judge descended the stairs by the side of the sport, and in a genial way passed his hand through Blake's arm.

"You are a stranger to me, sir, but for all that I don't mind saying that I have taken a great fancy to you," the old gentleman said. "And I would be pleased to be come better acquainted."

"Nothing in the world would please me better," the sport replied.

"The colonel"—and the judge nodded to the racing-man—"will tell you that I am a true blue sport, and worth the knowing."

"Oh, yes," Buckhannon replied. He was on the other side of Blake.

"The judge is a gentleman of the old school, and I can recommend him as a scholar, a judge of good whisky, and a man generally whom it is perfectly safe to tie to."

"Well, such a setting out as that ought to satisfy any man," Blake remarked. "And I can truly say that I am pleased to make your acquaintance."

"My name is Jackson Blake; I am something of a sport and have come to Lexington with the idea that I might be able to pick up a stake on the races."

"Ah, yes, I see," the old gentleman observed. "Well, I am glad to have the pleasure of making your acquaintance, Mr. Blake. My name is Marmaduke Throckmorton and I am the proprietor of the Bon Ami stock farm."

Then the two shook hands.

"What do you say, gentlemen, to joining me in a little supper at the French restaurant?" the old gentleman asked.

"I shall be delighted," Blake replied.

"It is a good idea, judge, and I am with you!" the colonel exclaimed.

The three then proceeded to the French restaurant where the judge ordered an elaborate supper and while it was being prepared the old gentleman took occasion to broach a subject which he had in his mind.

"I was very much surprised to-night at the way in which you called Doc Thibideau down," he remarked.

"The Doc is usually considered to be a mighty hard man to buck against, particularly when he is on his native heath, and although I have known him for some time yet I cannot remember of his ever coming out second best in an affair of this kind before."

"Well, as a rule, it always is a difficult matter for a stranger to beard one of these tip-top gamblers in his own domain and get the best of the encounter," the Fresh admitted.

"But I worked the trick so as to take the man by surprise, and after I got the drop on him he could not help himself."

"But really now, Mr. Blake, do you think that he did intend to run a crooked game?" the old gentleman asked, evidently reluctant to believe that such could be the case.

"Oh, yes, not a doubt about the matter!" the sport declared decidedly.

"The regular dealer was playing all right—dealing a perfectly square game, but when the proprietor saw that the tide of luck had set in strong against the bank he realized that if you persisted in betting five and ten thousand dollars at a clip, it would not take long for you to break the bank."

"That is true enough," the old gentleman assented.

"The Doc bears the reputation of being about as well heeled as any of them, but few faro banks are there in the country which can stand a pull of twenty or thirty thousand dollars without giving up the ghost."

"He took the dealer's seat with the deliberate intention of running a crooked game," the sport declared.

"He either had to try a trick of that sort, or else shut up shop."

"But it is just as I told him," the Fresh added. "I have gambled on the green so long that there are few tricks known to the sporting fraternity which I am not acquainted with. The moment the boss took his seat in the dealer's chair, I suspected just what game he intended to play, and it was not long before I detected that he was ringing in a cold deal."

"You certainly managed the affair in a capital way," the judge observed. "And I must congratulate you upon the ability which you displayed."

"Well, I flatter myself that I did succeed in making a success out of it, but you see I had the man at such a disadvantage that he could not make a good fight," the sport observed.

"I was very much impressed, indeed, by the style in which you handled the matter," the old gentleman remarked. "And the idea came to me that if I could secure such a man as you are to act as general-manager for my affairs it would be a good idea for me to do so."

"I am at liberty to negotiate," the sport replied immediately.

"Do you think you would care to accept such a position?" the judge asked.

"Oh, yes; the situation would be a congenial one to me," Blake explained.

"I am tolerably well-posted in regard to such matters for I have had a breeding farm of my own, in the East, and then, too, I have put in considerable time on Western ranches."

"I have never made any money out of my farms for I must admit that I am not a particularly good manager," the judge explained. "And I have never been fortunate enough to get hold of the right kind of a man."

"There has always been too many leaks on my place, you understand."

"If the judge hadn't been a millionaire in the beginning I reckon that his stock farm would have burst him long ago!" the colonel declared.

"That is the truth—not a doubt about it?" the old gentleman assented.

"Of course you are an entire stranger to me," the judge continued. "But from the way in which you managed this matter tonight I have got the idea that you would be just the man to take charge of my affairs."

"I am satisfied that a good, practical man, one of the kind who would not be inclined to stand any nonsense from anybody, would succeed in running my place so that at the end of every year I should not have to go down into my pocketbook to pay losses."

"There isn't any doubt that the judge's place ought to pay," the colonel explained.

"But, you see, the judge is not the kind of man to look after the details—he can't go round gathering up the corners, as the farmers say, and the result is that he comes out behind every year on his place, although, apparently, everything is going on well."

"All such enterprises require the personal supervision of the owner, or else a man who will act with a due regard to the owner's interest," Blake remarked.

"I do not doubt but what your place is like some others of the kind which I have seen."

"You have a gang of men there who have come to the conclusion that they practically own the estate, and so they go in to fill their pockets, without any thought of how the man who pays the bills is going to come out."

"I am afraid that that is just the way the thing has worked," the judge admitted with a grave shake of the head.

"You see, I am a sort of an easy-going fellow, and naturally opposed to taking much trouble, and as I am not actually pushed for money I do not keep as close a watch over my men as by rights I ought to do."

"Now, although you are a total stranger to me, and all I know about you is the way you carried yourself in the little episode which happened to-night, yet I have got the

notion into my head that you are just the man to take charge of my place and read the riot act to some of the rascals who have been fattening on me for so long."

"I will make the attempt, anyway, and if I do not succeed you can rest assured that it will not be for the want of trying!" the sport declared.

At this point the conversation was interrupted by the serving of the supper.

After the viands were placed upon the table the three proceeded to dispose of them, conversing as they ate.

The judge and Blake soon came to an agreement in regard to salary, and it was arranged that the sport should take the reins on the next day.

"The sooner the better!" the Fresh declared. "I havn't anything to occupy my mind, and the quicker I get in harness again the better I will like it."

Then the conversation turned upon general subjects until the repast ended.

Just as the three lit their cigars a gentleman was introduced into the apartment by the waiter.

He was a middle-aged man, dressed neatly, with a pale, colorless face, and the general appearance of a sporting man.

"I beg pardon, gentlemen, for intruding, but I have a little business to transact with that gentleman," the new comer said, and he nodded to Blake as he spoke.

"I am at your service, sir," the sport responded.

"I have not the pleasure of knowing your name," the other remarked.

"Jackson Blake," replied the Fresh.

"Ah, yes; well, mine is Joseph Graham."

"I am pleased to see you, Mr. Graham," the sport remarked.

"My presence here is due to a rather disagreeable duty which I have to perform," the stranger explained.

Blake nodded and favored the man with an inquiring look.

"I came on behalf of Mr. Victor Thibideau."

"You are welcome, sir, I assure you," the sport said with courtly politeness, for he anticipated what was coming.

"Mr. Thibideau feels very much aggrieved at the treatment which he received from you this evening and I have come in his behalf to demand the satisfaction due from one gentleman to another."

CHAPTER XXX.

A HOSTILE MEETING.

A LOOK of surprise appeared on the faces of the racing-man and the judge.

This was something for which they had not been prepared.

"I did not anticipate anything of this kind but it is the unexpected that always happens in this uncertain world," the sport observed.

"Of course I presume that you are aware that you acted in a manner calculated to give great offense to the gentleman whom I represent?" Mr. Graham remarked.

"Yes, I suppose that Mr. Thibideau did not relish either my speech or actions," the sport replied.

"That is correct, sir, and I trust you will not object to giving him the satisfaction which he demands."

"Oh, no, not at all," Blake replied. "If he considers that I have wronged him I am willing to make all the amends in my power."

"I am glad to hear it, sir," the other responded with a low bow.

"If you will have the kindness to refer me to the gentleman who will act as your second we will arrange the details of the matter," the visitor added.

"Yes, that is the usual way of arranging matters," the sport remarked.

"Well, colonel, I suppose I will have to call on you to act for me in this emergency," Blake said to the racing-man.

"I shall be delighted to oblige you," Buckhannon replied.

"I am aware that there is usually a deal of formality about matters of this kind," the sport remarked, "and I do not see any use of wasting time. It is all right for the men across the water, in the Old World, who are hampered with the knowledge that their fathers, and grandfathers, and great-grandfathers used to do certain things in certain

ways, but that sort of thing don't go in this land of the free and home of the brave, so I think we had better come right down to business at once."

"Yes, it seems to me it would be desirable," the visitor said, rather perplexed by the abrupt, off hand manner of the sport.

"It is customary when a man gets a challenge of this kind to refer the man who brings the hostile message to the gentleman who is to act as the second of the challenged party, then the particulars as to time, place and weapons are decided."

"Yes, that is the usual custom," Graham assented. "I have assisted at several little affairs of this kind so I am well posted about the matter."

"I propose to come right down to business and sweep aside all these antiquated formalities," the Fresh declared.

"I do not see any use of having to confer with my second and then send you to him, all of which takes time, when the affair can be arranged at once."

"Ah, yes, I comprehend, but this is rather an unusual way of arranging the matter," Graham observed.

"Very true, but it saves a lot of time," the sport declared.

"We come straight to the point instead of 'going around Robin Hood's barn' as the old saying goes."

"That is correct, undoubtedly," the visitor replied.

"Now, then, we can settle the matter off-hand. I am the challenged party, and as such entitled to the choice of time, place and weapons," the sport remarked.

"That is right," Graham assented.

"I will choose revolvers for the weapons, at thirty paces. After the signal is given each party to be at liberty to advance and fire as often, and as quickly as they like until the revolvers are emptied, and I assume that by that time either one, or both of us, will be in such a condition as to put a stop to hostilities."

Graham meditated over the matter for a moment.

"Well, as the conditions are certainly as fair for one as for the other I do not see any objections," he said.

"The thing is as square as square can be!" the sport declared.

"I do not seek to take any advantage. All I ask is a square deal and I am willing to give my antagonist the fairest show in the world for his money."

"But how about the time and place?" the visitor asked.

"We will say to-morrow morning at an early hour, so that we will be reasonably sure of not being interrupted," the sport replied.

"About five o'clock?" Graham suggested.

"Yes, that hour will do," Blake answered.

"And the place?" the visitor asked.

"Now you have got me, for I am a stranger and not posted in regard to localities," the sport replied.

"Colonel, you will have to post me," Blake continued turning to the racing-man, "for you undoubtedly know some secluded spot where we will not stand much chance of being disturbed."

"I can recommend a spot about five miles southwest of the city," the old judge observed.

"Thirty years ago it was often used as a dueling ground, but since that time that mode of settling disputes has rather gone out of favor."

"How will that do?" Blake inquired.

"That is satisfactory, for I have perfect confidence in Mr. Throckmorton's judgment," Graham remarked with a bow to the old gentleman.

"And I would be much pleased if he would act as master of ceremonies," the visitor added.

"So would I!" Blake hastened to declare.

"I havn't any objection to taking the position," the judge remarked.

"In the old days I had considerable experience in that line and I flatter myself that I have not forgotten how to work the oracle.

"The main thing is to keep the affair as quiet as possible."

The others nodded assent.

"We used to do the trick in this way," the judge explained.

"The night before two hacks were secured. The master of ceremonies got into one, drove to the quarters of one of the duelists and he entered the hack, where a doctor was already ensconced.

"Then the carriage proceeded to the grounds selected for the fight.

"The second hack, containing the other fighter and his second, was in waiting at a certain place, and when the first hack drove by followed in the rear until the ground was reached, taking care, you understand, to keep so far behind that no one's attention would be attracted."

All agreed that this was an excellent plan and it was arranged that the proceedings should be conducted in that way.

Each man was to furnish his own revolver and after a few more words Graham took his departure.

"Well, my dear fellow, you are in for it," the judge exclaimed.

"Yes, I shall have to face the music," the sport responded as cheerfully as though he had received an invitation to a ball.

"I don't know much about Doc's skill with the revolver," Throckmorton observed, thoughtfully. "But I have always understood that he bore the reputation of being a desperate man; a particularly hard nut to tackle, you understand."

"As a rule all these prominent gamblers are well able to take care of themselves in a row," the sport asserted.

"The ability to fight is most important to a man leading a life of that kind, and I have no doubt that the gentleman is able to hold his own tolerably well in any company."

"But you do not seem to be much concerned about the matter?" the colonel remarked in surprise.

"Oh, no, because I may say without boasting that when it comes to a revolver fight, I am the biggest kind of a big chief," Blake said with a confident smile.

"I was always a good shot with either pistol or rifle, and as I spent a number of years on the Pacific Slope, in the mining region, where my life often depended upon my marksmanship, I got to be about as handy with a revolver as any man I ever ran across, and I don't except the professional experts either who travel around the country giving shooting exhibitions."

"Under those circumstances, then, I don't wonder that you feel tolerably confident of getting away with Doc Thibideau," the judge remarked.

"I do not desire to appear in the role of a boaster, but it is my opinion that I will be able to give this gambler a severe lesson," Blake remarked.

"I am not anxious to kill the man, you understand, for I do not hanker after his blood, although he evidently does for mine."

"Well, you see, my dear fellow, you called him down right in his own house, and in the presence of a crowd, and as he has always carried matters with a high hand here in the city, it is only natural for him to feel ugly about the matter," Throckmorton observed.

The conversation then turned to another subject, and as it has no connection with our story, we will not detail it.

After the supper was ended the judge insisted upon Blake coming to the Phenix Hotel with him so as to be all ready for the early start.

The judge attended to the hiring of the hack, secured a medical man to accompany the party and then all retired to rest.

The four were called a little after four on the next morning.

Judge Throckmorton had arranged for coffee to be served in his room at half-past four, for, as he explained to the others:

"It is one of the worst things a man can do to go to the field, when an affair of this kind is on hand, on an empty stomach.

"Even the best nerved man in the world is apt to be a little shaky early in the morning, and I have known a number of ready good shots to make a sorry bungle of it in an affair of this kind just because they neglected to take a little stimulant before going to the field of action."

All agreed that the judge's advice was wise.

The coffee disposed of the party started on the outskirts of the town the other hack.

fell in behind, and just at five o'clock exactly the party arrived at the dueling-ground, which was a secluded spot on a side road.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AFTER REVENGE.

A BETTER location for an affair of this kind could not have been found within a hundred miles of the city.

As the judge was an old hand at this thing it did not take him long to arrange the preliminaries.

Within ten minutes after the party arrived upon the spot the sport and the gambler were facing each other, revolver in hand.

Throckmorton occupied a position thirty paces from each man, out of the direct range of course.

In his hand he held a white handkerchief and it had been agreed that at the fall of the handkerchief the fight was to begin.

"Now, then, are you all ready, gentlemen?" the judge asked.

"Ready!" responded the gambler.

"All correct!" ejaculated the sport.

Down went the handkerchief.

The idea of having the matter arranged in this way was so that neither party would be able to take aim at the other until the handkerchief fluttered in the air, for as their eyes must be fixed upon the judge so as to detect when the signal was given, it was plain that the fighters could not pay any attention to each other.

It was the gambler who had proposed that the affair be arranged in this way and Blake agreed to it at once.

Thibideau thought that by this course he was securing an important advantage for he prided himself upon being a snap-shot, and he conjectured that if he could fix the matter in this way he stood a chance to disable his adversary before he could fire.

In reality though he could not have made an arrangement which would have suited the sport better.

As the reader who has followed the fortunes of the renowned Fresh of Frisco knows, Jackson Blake was one of the most expert snap-shots who ever took a revolver in hand.

And on this occasion no sooner had the handkerchief left the hand of the judge than up came the sport's revolver—he had held it at the level of his waist—and he blazed away at the gambler before Thibideau could get a chance to fire.

At sixty-feet so excellent a shot as Jackson Blake could not miss his man, and he did not.

He had aimed to hit the gambler in the right shoulder, but Thibideau raised his arm to fire at that precise moment and so the gambler received the ball in his right wrist, immediately disabling him.

Down went Thibideau's revolver to the ground, the gambler dropping the weapon as though it had suddenly become red-hot.

A bitter curse came from the lips of the wounded man for he realized that he was beaten.

The judge, the doctor, and Graham immediately hurried to Thibideau.

"You are wounded?" Throckmorton exclaimed.

"Yes, I received the ball in my wrist; my arm will be useless for a time I fear," the gambler exclaimed, angrily, for notwithstanding the command which he possessed over himself he was not able to conceal his rage at being thus easily defeated.

The doctor proceeded to examine the wound.

"I don't suppose that you can bandage my wrist up so I can get another shot at him, eh?" the gambler asked.

"Oh, no! quite out of the question!" the medical man replied.

"In fact, my dear sir, I think you will be lucky to get the use of the arm in a month."

"I reckon the thing is through then?" the judge said in an inquiring way.

"Yes, I suppose so, worse luck!" the gambler declared.

The judge then beckoned to Blake and the colonel, who had hastened to the side of his principal when he saw the gambler was wounded.

When the two came up Throckmorton remarked:

"Gentlemen, I reckon this little affair is ended. Mr. Thibideau has got a ball through his wrist—his right wrist—so he is disabled."

"I trust that at some future time you will not object to give me my revenge, for I can assure you that I am not at all satisfied to have the affair end in this way," the gambler remarked, to the sport.

"I shall be delighted, sir, to oblige you," the Fresh replied, with a polite bow.

"Whenever you feel inclined to seek satisfaction you may rest assured that I will be at your service."

"We might try another exchange of shots using our left hands," Thibideau suggested.

He was so enraged by his defeat that he was willing to do almost anything to secure revenge.

"I am agreeable," Blake replied. "Haven't the least objection to using the left hand, but as I always try to play a square game, and do not seek to take advantage of anyone, will you permit me inquire if you are used to pistol practice with your left hand?"

"No, I am not," the gambler replied. "I never fired a pistol with my left hand in my life."

"Well, I thought it was very probable that such was the case," the sport remarked. "So it is only fair for me to tell you that I can shoot about as well with my left hand as with my right."

"I have spent a number of years on the Pacific Slope, and in that region all men who lead a life of adventure find it most important to be as expert with the left hand as with the right."

"Such being the case then a left-handed duel would be a most unwise proceeding on Mr. Thibideau's part!" Graham hastened to declare.

"Oh, yes, there isn't any doubt about that," the sport responded.

"You would possess such a decided advantage that my principal would not stand any chance at all," Graham argued.

"Exactly! the old joke comes in, the only chance he stands would be to be struck by lightning," the irrepressible Fresh declared.

"In my judgment, gentlemen, the affair should not proceed further," Throckmorton observed.

"Mr. Thibideau is disabled and that ought to settle the matter for the present."

"At some future time if he wishes to demand another meeting that is a different affair altogether."

"It would be the height of folly for me to proceed if I do not stand any chance at all," the gambler remarked. "So we will consider the matter ended, but you can rest assured that at some future day I will seek my revenge."

"Which I will only be too happy to grant," Blake replied with a polite bow.

Then the party separated.

The ball had passed completely through Thibideau's wrist and while the conversation had been going on the doctor had bandaged the wound, remarking as he did so that if the gambler would be careful not to take cold, he would not be likely to experience any ill effects beyond the loss of the use of the limb for a few weeks.

The old judge, the doctor and the sport, with his second, departed in the first hack, Thibideau and Graham occupying the second.

"Did any one ever see a more infernal bit of bad luck?" the boss gambler exclaimed in deep disgust after the hack started for the city.

"It was a mighty rough deal and no mistake!" Graham coincided.

"The fact is you made the mistake of underrating your man."

"That is true; no doubt about it. I took him to be an ordinary sort of chap—rather sharp-eyed and well posted in regard to gambling matters or he never would have detected so quickly that I was trying to ring in a brace game."

"Yes, he was onto you in a minute," Graham declared.

"He is an old hand at the business or he never would have tumbled to the thing so quick."

"At the time I thought he was merely guessing at it," the boss gambler added. "But after this little experience I have come to the conclusion that he is an old Californian

sport, and one who is probably posted in regard to every trick that is going."

"I don't think there is a doubt about it!" Graham declared. "In fact I am well satisfied about the matter. He is from the Pacific Slope, and, the chances are about a hundred to one that he is up to about every dodge which has ever been worked in a gambling room."

"And the fellow is a fighter, too, from Fighterville!" the boss gambler declared.

"I always flattered myself that I was something of a shot, particularly when it came to quick work, but the way in which he plugged me, without apparently taking any aim at all, was plain proof that I wasn't in it when it came to a game with a chap like himself."

"You spoke about calling upon him to give you satisfaction when you recovered from your wound," Graham observed. "But, really, after this exhibition of what the man can do in the fighting line I shouldn't think that you would want to face him again."

"No more do I," Thibideau responded. "That was only a bluff to make him think that I did not harbor any malice."

"I do want revenge, though, and you can bet your life that I am going to have it, too!"

"The voice of Thibideau was hoarse with anger as he spoke.

"Going to stack the cards and ring in a cold deal on him, eh?" Graham suggested.

"Yes, that is just the little game that I am going to play."

"It has got to be a sure thing this time," the boss gambler added.

"I am going to work the trick so that this man will not have any show at all."

"You are right," the other assented. "The job must be done in that way, or else the chances are big that this Blake will get the best of the deal."

"Now then, Graham, I must depend upon you to get me one or two good men, who will be willing to do anything provided they are well paid, and the job must be arranged so that if it goes wrong we cannot be called to an account."

"I will fix the thing up all right, don't you have any fears in regard to that," Graham declared, confidently. "In a week or so, this fellow will get his ticket for soup!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

A COMING EVENT.

JUDGE THROCKMORTON was very much delighted at the victory which the sport had won so easily.

These gamblers are inclined to be extremely ugly once in a while, and it does all of them a heap of good when one of the fraternity gets a severe lesson," the old fellow declared.

His companions agreed with him, and all in the coach made merry over the sport's triumph during the homeward ride.

The judge insisted upon all coming to breakfast with him at the hotel.

"This will be my last day at the Phenix," Throckmorton explained.

"My wife arrives this afternoon, and we have been lucky enough to secure a furnished house in the neighborhood of my stables, so we will be tolerably comfortable during the race meeting."

After breakfast was over the judge took the sport to his stables and introduced him as the new superintendent.

Throckmorton had an extensive establishment, for he had a round dozen of high-mettled steeds entered in the various races, and these costly beasts required a small army of men to wait upon them.

Blake was placed in full charge of everything and he spent the day in familiarizing himself with the duties of his new position.

The old judge made his appearance at about five o'clock, and announced that his wife had arrived, and was pretty well settled in her new home.

"Whenever you are ready we will depart so as to be in ample time for supper," the old gentleman said in conclusion.

There were only a few things which needed attention, and in a quarter of an hour the sport was ready to depart.

When the two arrived at the house Blake

was introduced to the judge's wife, a buxom, motherly, middle-aged woman, a good type of the Kentucky matron, and then the housekeeper made her appearance, and to Blake's surprise it was Belle Hawkins.

The judge and his wife were surprised when the pair announced that they were old acquaintances.

The sport briefly explained how it was that he happened to know the girl, and the old couple listened to the story with interest.

"You had quite a time of it," Throckmorton remarked.

"Oh, yes, but all is well that ends well, you know," the sport observed.

"I had little idea, though, that when you came to the intelligence office and I made arrangements with you to come as housekeeper and companion that I should meet Mr. Blake," the girl said.

All agreed that it was an odd coincidence.

Supper was announced at this moment and the four proceeded to the table.

During the meal the judge discussed the coming race meeting.

"On the first day I have a most important event on the books," the old gentleman said. "I have a six-year-old mare, Kentucky Girl, which I fancy can show her heels to any horse in the country in a two-mile race."

"Colonel Tom Jackson of the Hermitage Stock-farm, Nashville, Tennessee, does not agree with me in regard to this."

"He has a four year old colt by the name of Father Tom, a very speedy beast indeed, but not the equal of my mare to my thinking."

"They have met in two races now; the first was a mile and a half and the colt won by a nose, but if the wire had been ten feet further off the mare would have won beyond a doubt."

"The next time the two met was at New Orleans."

The mare was off her feed and I had a great notion of scratching her, but as the report that she was not fit had got around and the betting was 30 to 1 against her I thought I would let her start.

"It was a two mile dash, and I instructed the jockey to hold the mare back until the last half-mile then to give her her head and do his best to get up."

"The boy through excess of caution rather overdid the thing for he held back too long, but finally when he got through his horses and challenged the colt, although there was only about a hundred yards to the end, the mare got up to the colt's shoulder, and as in the previous case would surely have won if the wire had been a few yards further off."

"Under the circumstances then I do not wonder that you have faith in the ability of your horse to win the race," the sport observed.

"Well, I think I have got a pretty sure thing of it," the old gentleman observed with a chuckle."

"In the first place I was very careful how I made the match, and there is an old saying, you know, and in my opinion it is an extremely true one, that a match well made is half won."

"Oh, yes, there isn't any doubt that there is a deal of truth in it," the sport assented.

"The match is for ten thousand dollars a side, at catch weights, with gentlemen jockies, a single two mile dash."

"Now the mare can carry weight much better than the colt, and as a gentleman jock is never as light as a regular professional, it follows that I have got the best of it in this matter."

"Oh, yes, decidedly!" Blake declared.

"Then two miles suits the mare to a t! She is better at two miles than she is at any distance more or less, whilid the colt although a very speedy beast for a mile and a half, or three-quarters at the utmost, begins to come back to his horses at two miles."

"Of course, it is possible that you may come to the conclusion that I am prejudiced in favor of my own horse, but I can assure you that I always try to look at such a matter with unbiased eyes."

"I do not doubt that at all!" the sport assented.

"You have had years of experience and ought to be as capable of coming to a correct opinion about the matter as any man in the country."

"Well, I think that is the truth, and as proof that I am not holding a prejudiced opinion I can say that the public at large agree with me that my mare will beat the colt."

"The state of the betting is the best proof of what people think about the matter."

"Right in the beginning, just as soon as the match was made, I sent some friends of mine to get a few bets on the result, thinking that I ought to be able to get even money, but these bookmakers are a shrewd lot and they had figured on the affair just as I did, and the best they were willing to offer was five to six against the mare."

"That was a clear indication of what they thought of the chances," the sport observed.

"Yes, and then I told my friends to hold off for a while, thinking that the general public might come to the conclusion to back the colt and I would be able to get better odds."

"I wanted to put about twenty thousand dollars on the race, you understand, and so it was important for me to get the best possible odds."

Blake nodded assent.

"I held off for a couple of months, but as the public didn't come forward to send the colt's price up, I concluded that I had better get the money at the going odds."

"I am an old hand at this sort of thing, you comprehend, Mr. Blake, and so my men were instructed to bet the money in the most cautious way, for if the betting men got the impression that the stable thought the mare had a cinch, and were willing to back the opinion with good money, the odds would go up."

"Oh, yes, these betting men are a lot of uncommonly shrewd fellows, and they always do their level best to get the butt end of every bargain."

"I must admit that I did not succeed in fooling them, for before my friends could invest ten thousand of my money, the price went up, and now four to six is the best that any of the rascals are willing to do."

"As a general thing these bookmakers succeed in finding out about all the important facts in regard to a race," the sport observed. "They are always ready to pay in the most liberal manner for information, and so it does not matter how carefully stable secrets are guarded, for important secrets are sure to leak out."

"That is true, and I can assure you, my dear sir, that I have taken the greatest care to keep outsiders from getting at my stable."

"Why, the buildings are guarded as carefully as a prison, only my men, instead of trying to keep the people in the place from getting out, were occupied in keeping outsiders from getting in."

"The bookmakers will be hard hit if my mare wins, for the great outside public are sweet on her, and she carries a heap of public besides the cash which I and my friends have put up."

"In that case you cannot be too careful in having the stable well guarded, for some of these betting men are tough customers, and they would not hesitate to do the mare a mischief if the matter could be so arranged that the deed could not be brought home to them."

"Yes, yes, no doubt at all about that!" the old gentleman exclaimed.

"I am well aware of that fact, and that is one of the evils connected with the turf—there are a deuced lot of rascals who manage to make a living out of it, and a gentleman who loves the 'sport of kings,' as some great man once termed racing, is forced to associate more or less with some fellows whom he would be apt to kick out of his house with scant ceremony if they dared to presume to pay him a visit."

"That is the truth undoubtedly, but, somehow, it cannot be helped," the sport observed.

"There are some villains, bangers-on to the turf, who would not hesitate to poison either a horse or a jockey, if they could make a few dollars by so doing."

"And it is owing to this fact that I am keeping the name of the gentleman who is to ride the mare a profound secret, for I don't want him to be annoyed in any way, and if it was known who was to do the riding some of the scoundrels might try to get at him."

"Very true, and you are wise to keep the matter quiet."

By this time the meal was ended and all rose from the table ending the conversation.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE ASSAULT.

The position which the sport had taken was a congenial one to him and time did not hang heavy on his hands.

The race meeting was to commence on Monday and on the Saturday previous the judge introduced Blake to the gentleman jockey who was to ride the mare in the great match race.

Basil Calvert he was called, a retired, unassuming sort of a fellow, but Throckmorton declared that he was a most excellent rider.

The three had a drink together in the Phenix Hotel saloon and then went down to the street to a pool-room where a large amount of betting was being done so as to learn the latest odds.

It was a little after ten o'clock when the trio left the saloon and although there were a number of people in the main thoroughfare yet when they turned into the side street where the pool-room was located they found that it was almost deserted.

No one of the three gave a thought to the matter, though, nor did any of them notice that they had been followed by two rough-looking men, who came along on the opposite side of the street, but were careful to keep well in the rear.

The three remained in the pool-room for a little over an hour, and then departed.

As they came up the street the two men, who were concealed in a doorway, waited until the three passed and then they stole out with drawn revolvers in their hands.

They were only about twenty-five feet in the rear of the three.

One of the men was a stout, muscular fellow, the other short and slender.

"Now, Jimmy," said the tall fellow, "you try to play him, and if you miss, I will take a hand in the game."

"Oh, I reckon I don't stand much chance to miss him at this distance," the other replied.

The pair spoke in cautious whispers, but careful as they were, the sound of their voices came to the hearing of the Fresh, who had the ears of a cat as far as keenness of hearing was concerned.

He turned his head quickly, and as soon as he caught sight of the men he understood the danger which threatened.

"Look out for your lives!" he exclaimed, and as he spoke he dropped as if he had been shot.

The movement saved his life, for the bullet which the ruffian discharged at him whistled harmlessly over his head.

The man did not have time to fire a second shot, for Blake whipped his revolver out in a twinkling and blazed away at him.

The sport fired at a disadvantage, for under the circumstances he had no chance to take aim, but the bullet whistled so near to the heads of the ruffians that it immediately took all the fight out of them.

The big fellow fired a single shot, and then both took to their heels.

The shot was almost fired at random, but the gentleman jockey was unlucky enough to be in the way, and he got the bullet in his right arm near the shoulder.

"The fellow has hit me!" Calvert exclaimed, excitedly.

He was reaching for his revolver at the time he received the wound, but that fact put a stop to his offensive operations.

As it happened the judge was not armed. Being a man at peace with all the world he had never found it necessary to carry a weapon.

Blake sprung to his feet the moment the fellows began to retreat, and took deliberate aim at them.

The pair made for the doorway, where they had found shelter.

But just as they reached it the sport opened fire upon them.

Crack, crack!

Sharply rung out the reports of the revolver on the still night air.

Two yells of agony followed the shots. Both of the men were hit.

An expert marksman like the Fresh of Frisco could not fail to hit his men at such a distance.

He had dropped both men in their tracks. Although there had not been a soul in the street besides the five engaged in this affair when the affray began, yet the pistol-shots soon attracted a curious crowd.

There was a police captain and one of the patrolmen, the first two men as it happened to arrive on the scene.

They came from the main street, and so encountered the three friends first.

"Hello! what is the matter?" the captain inquired.

The Fresh briefly explained the situation.

The captain recognized the sport as soon as he spoke.

"By Jove! Mr. Blake, I reckon the fellows didn't know that they were running up against a buzz saw when they tackled you!" the officer declared.

"They are aware of the fact now, I think, for I have laid both of them out," the sport replied.

Then they proceeded to where the two wounded men lay groaning upon the ground.

The officer recognized them at once and called them by name.

"Jim Black and Stumpy Pete, two of the worst men in the city!" he declared.

Then the captain's attention was attracted to the fact that the door of the house before which the pair had fallen was open.

"Hello! what does this mean?" he exclaimed.

It did not take the astute police officer long to decide in regard to the matter.

The house was an unoccupied one, and the ruffians had evidently forced open the door.

"Oh! I see the game!" the captain declared.

"And a mighty cunning one it was too.

"These fellows wanted to get a chance at you for some reason, and they laid in wait in this doorway.

"If they had succeeded in laying you out, then they would have retreated into this house, fastening the door behind them, and while their pursuers were breaking the door down the rascals would have escaped through the alley in the rear."

"A very clever planned scheme indeed, but the thing didn't work," the Fresh observed.

The captain proceeded to examine the men.

According to their statement they had been wantonly assaulted by the sport for no reason whatever.

They were terribly wounded, expected to die, and called upon the officer to arrest Blake so that he might be tried for their murder.

"Oh, that is all bosh!" the captain cried, decidedly.

"You laid in wait to assault Mr. Blake and have only got what you deserve.

"Then too, I reckon that you are making a heap more fuss about the thing than there is any warrant for, for to my thinking neither one of you is half as badly hurt as you are trying to make out."

Both of the fellows protested that this was not so, declaring that they were suffering the most terrible agony.

"I will get you into the hands of a doctor as soon as possible," the officer replied, and then he dispatched the policeman to summon assistance in order to convey the pair to the jail.

Both of the ruffians made a vigorous remonstrance when they heard the captain mention the jail.

"Say! it would be a downright shame to take us to a jail!" the tall man declared in a sulky way.

"You bet your life on that!" the other asserted.

"You ought to send us to a hospital."

"It will depend upon what the doctor says," the officer replied.

"But it is my opinion that you are not so badly hurt but what the jail will be plenty good enough for you."

The policeman acted promptly and soon returned with the doctor.

A brief examination satisfied the surgeon that neither one of the men was dangerously hurt, and so, despite their protests the pair were carried to the jail.

The doctor also examined Calvert's arm.

It was a trivial wound, the ball having passed through the fleshy part of the arm

It was painful, of course, and would take some time to heal, but that was all.

At the jail the party encountered the chief of police who had come in hot haste when he received information of the affair.

He had a conference with Blake; Judge Throckmorton, Calvert and the captain of police were also present.

"This is a very mysterious affair," the chief declared.

"I know these two men of old; they are a pair of bad eggs; fellows who would not hesitate to commit almost any crime, and a job of highway robbery would be right in their line, but according to the accounts they did not try anything of the kind."

"Oh, no," Blake replied. "Their game was not robbery but murder."

"So it certainly appears," the official assented. "But what was the motive? Have you ever had any trouble with either of the men?"

"No; in fact I never even saw them before to my knowledge," Blake replied.

"Well, well, it certainly is a most mysterious case!" the chief declared.

"The only reasonable explanation as far as I can see is that the men were hired to attack me by some one," the sport remarked.

"Yes, that might be possible," the superintendent assented.

"I do not think there is any doubt but what I was the man whom they were after, for I was on the outside of the walk, and when I turned around the fellow had his gun leveled directly at me."

"In fact, if I hadn't dropped there isn't any doubt in my mind that he would have plugged me for keeps."

"Perhaps it would be a good idea to interview the men and see if we can get any information out of them," the chief suggested.

"It will not do any hurt," the sport replied.

"It may be possible to come to some arrangement with them," the police superintendent explained.

"I comprehend," Blake replied. "If they will make a clean breast of the affair we will let up on the prosecution."

"Exactly! I presume that you are not unwilling to make such an arrangement with them?" the chief said in a questioning tone.

"Oh, yes, that is all right," Blake rejoined. "I flatter myself that I have got decidedly the best of the affair."

"Of course we may find them stubborn, but it will not do any harm to endeavor to get the truth out of them," the chief observed.

All agreed to this, and then the chief and the sport proceeded to interview the prisoners.

Their wounds had been dressed, and a careful examination revealed that the doctor had not made a mistake in saying that neither wound was likely to prove dangerous.

The chief of police came right down to business.

"You are in a bad hole, I want you to understand," he remarked. "For, if Mr. Blake here chooses to push the case against you, the chances are great that you will go to the stone jug for a good long term of years."

The pair knew just how they were situated well enough and had determined upon a defense.

They declared they had both been drinking heavily and did not know what they were doing at the time of the assault.

"Too thin!" cried the superintendent sententiously. "It will not wash! You two were hired to attack Mr. Blake."

The pair scowled and seemed troubled.

Then the chief said that if they made a full confession the charge would not be pushed.

The pair held a brief consultation and then the big fellow said:

"You have made a fair offer and I would give the snap away in a moment if I could, but the man who worked the trick covered up his tracks so we can't put you on to him."

Then he explained how a stranger, with a false beard and wig had made the arrangement with them to attack Blake, but had fixed the matter so they had no clue to his identity.

Believing the man had told the truth, the two departed.

"I think I know who put up the job and in time I will get at him," Blake remarked to the chief.

When the three friends left the jail the old judge was very much disturbed.

"What on earth can I do?" he exclaimed.

"Calvert will not be able to ride the mare, and I will have difficulty in getting a gentleman jockey at such short notice."

"I will be glad to ride the mare for you," the Fresh observed.

"I am a tolerably good jockey, and I think I can give you a good show for your money."

"That is a capital idea, and I do not doubt but what you can land the mare a winner!" the old judge declared.

He had an extremely good opinion of the sport's abilities.

The judge's confidence was not unwarranted.

Blake rode the mare and won the race by a dozen lengths.

He had forced the pace from the beginning and so "broken the heart" of the colt, to use the sporting term.

After the race meeting was over Blake set out to find Doc Thibideau.

He believed the gambler to be the man who had put the assassins on his track.

But Thibideau was a wise man and had fled from the wrath to come, no one knew where.

Our story now is told.

The Fresh of Frisco's storm-tossed bark is once more anchored in a snug harbor, but how long this life will last is doubtful.

The judge hopes for many a day, for both Throckmorton and his worthy wife have set their hearts on making a match between Belle Hawkins and Blake, the Race-Track Sport.

THE END.

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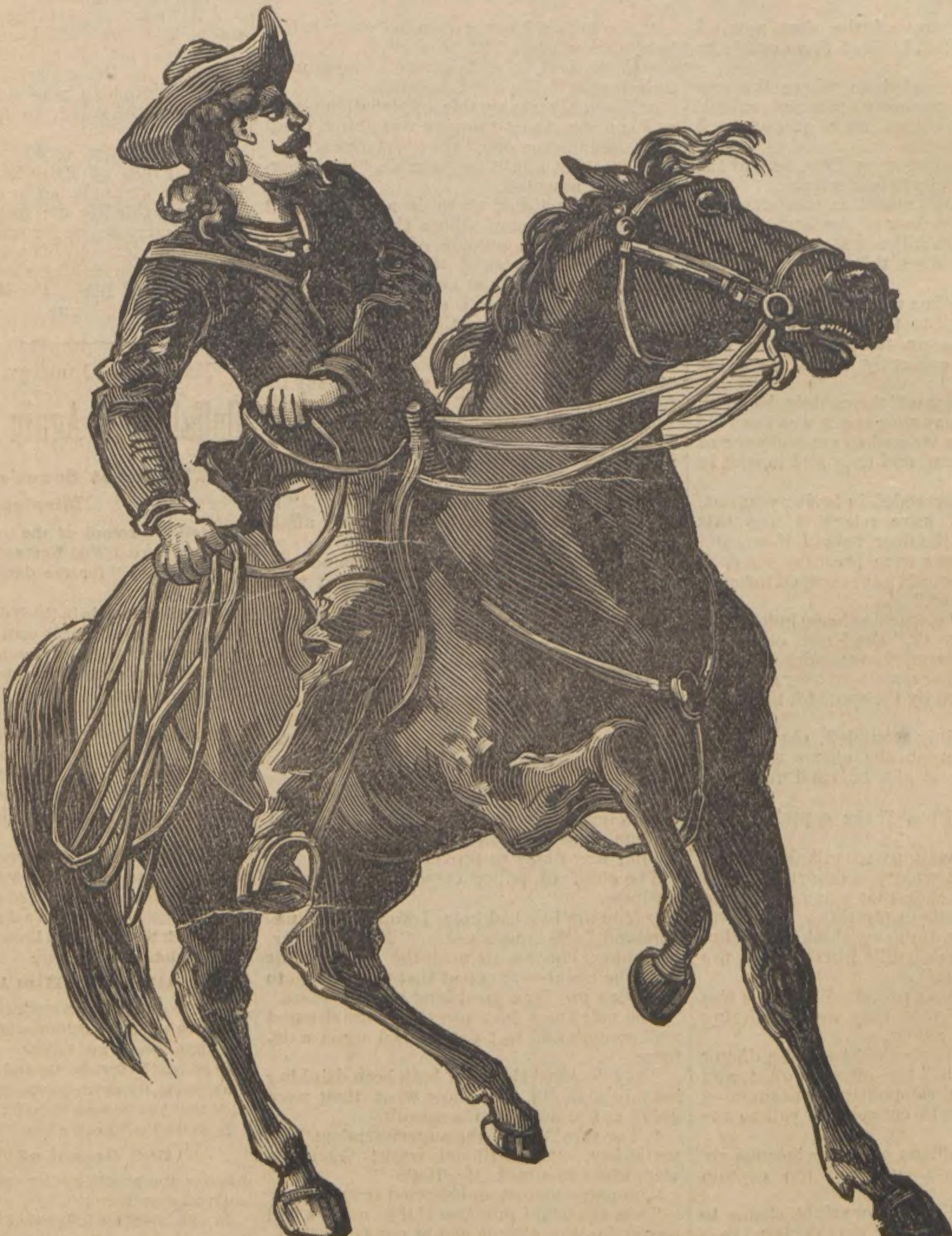
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